

**EMBODIED CULTURE AND ITS CONTESTATIONS:
A STUDY OF MANIPURI JAGOI RAAS**

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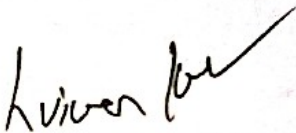
DECLARATION


I declare that the dissertation entitled "Embodied Culture and Its Contestations: A Study of Manipuri Jagoi Raas" submitted to Jawaharlal Nehru University for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy is my own work. The dissertation has not been submitted for any other degree of this University or any other University.



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CERTIFICATE

We recommend that this dissertation be placed before the examiners for evaluation.


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“How does it all begin? I suppose it never begins. It just continues.”

-Martha Graham (I am a Dancer, 1998)

Acknowledgement

“A terrible blank page stands against bloody terrific ideas. That’s the genesis of any good story”. It is a line which always gave me company while I stared into my blank pages. It is either too little knowledge or enormous ideas that cripples one to fill the blank pages. In my case, it was the little knowledge against the vast unconquered territory of Sociology, Anthropology, Dance Studies, Cultural Studies, Manipuri history, Manipuri Culture and what not. The un-ventured scared the words that came out of the small ventured territory. But my words were brave enough to fill some pages and put their feet in the long academic journey that awaits them. This could have never been possible without people I owe my gratitude to.

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Preface

It was eleven at night. A time we would otherwise be dreaming. But it was not one of those usual nights. At this late hour, I hurriedly tucked the pumngou phanek (a lower garment previously worn by widows and now worn on sacred occasions) and ran towards the courtyard where my mother, father and two of my cousins were waiting for me. Just few minutes away from our house situated near the largest pond in Manipur called Ningthem Pukhri (a pond excavated in 1726 by the king as part of consecration ceremonies and images of Krishna and Kali were placed), to whose south-western corner is the Ramji temple (dedicated to Lord Ram), we reached Govindaji Temple. Govindaji temple is not just a sacred space but it is the centre of Manipuri Vaishnavism. Unexpectedly, I saw quite a large turnout of 'people' (bhaktas, non-bhaktas and the ones in between like me). Unexpected, because I saw only ten to fifteen girls following the dance teacher in chali steps nervously while the teacher seemed to be the only one enjoying the rhythm and steps. It was five days before the actual performance and I had gone to get a sense of how the rehearsals happen. The next time I went was the last day of rehearsal. It had more people and also new people joining in after paying the required fees to the Govindaji Temple board. The final day of Raas (Basanta Raas) witnessed more people than the previous day. The initial thought I had about temple Raas Leela dying, after seeing ten to fifteen girls, proved wrong because on the final day, the Raas Mandali (sacred space where Raas is performed) could not accommodate all gopis which numbered somewhere between fifty- sixty. With their stiff costumes, there were two long parallel lines of gopis waiting to enter the mandap. There were aged men wearing colourful yellow and red turbans sitting in the corners of mandap. These are officials who manage the temple rituals. The statues of Govindaji and Raseswari were placed in the bhadra-chakra (a platform made of wooden plank and raised little above the ground) right in the middle of the mandap. It was a Raas Leela amidst cameras and technology. From a simple mobile phone to big cranes and sophisticated cameras, all fixed their lenses to capture moments of the 'spectacle' called Jagoi Raas or Raas Leela. A 'royal' spectacle which has transgressed the sacred boundary of temple to a more secular space called stage to represent a populace called 'Manipur'.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgement.....	i
Preface.....	ii
Table of Contents.....	iii-iv
List of Photos.....	v
Chapter I: Exploring Dance, Theorising Jagoi: An Introduction	
1.1. Introduction.....	2
1. 2. Conceptual framework.....	4
1. 3. Studies on Dance.....	6
1. 4. Dance, Culture and Gender.....	9
1. 5. Politics of Dance.....	11
1.6. Studies on Jagoi Raas.....	13
1.7. Statement of the Problem.....	14
1. 8. Research Objectives.....	14
1. 9. Research Questions.....	14
1. 10. A Methodological Note.....	14
1. 11 An Overview of the Chapters.....	15
Chapter II: Embodied Culture: Contextualising Jagoi Raas	
2. 1. Introduction.....	19
2. 2 Advent of Hinduism.....	21
2.3. Rebirth of Raas Leela as Jagoi Raas.....	27
2. 4. Jagoi Raas and its five forms.....	32
2. 4.1. Maha Raas.....	32
2. 4.2. Kunja Raas.....	35
2. 4.3. Basanta Raas.....	35
2.4.4. Nitya Raas.....	37
2.4.5. Diba Raas.....	38
2. 5. Essentials and Essence of Raas.....	40
2. 6. Jagoi Raas: A Potpurri of Religious and Cultural Synthesis.....	44
2. 7. Embodying a ‘new’ Culture.....	49
Chapter III: Sanitising the ‘erotic’: Bhakti, Love and Women’s Body	
3.1. Introduction.....	56

3. 2. Bhakti as the Essence of Vaishnavism and Jagoi Raas.....	57
3. 3. Union as Enacted in Raas and Pre-Raas Meitei dances.....	60
3. 4. Sanitisation through Costumes and Body Expressions.....	65
3. 5. Radha <i>Bhav</i> : Costruction of a Feminine Body.....	69
3. 6. Being Female Being Feminine.....	71

Chapter IV: Beyond the Spectacle: The Politics of Manipuri Jagoi Raas

4. 1. Introduction.....	80
4. 1. Shree Govindaji as the King: Politics of a Dream.....	81
4. 3. Jagoi Raas: A Royal Spectacle of the State.....	84
4. 4. Different Representations through Raas.....	87
4. 5. Making of a Classical Dance	92
4. 6. Contestations on Embodied Culture: Revivalist’s Perspective.....	95

Chapter V: Conclusion: Towards a New Beginning.....100

Bibliography

List of Photographs

1. Basanta Raas offered in Govindaji Temple in 2018.....	1
2. Statues of Shree Govindaji and Shreemati Radhika enshrined on the Bhadra chakra...18	
3. <i>Makok Chingbi</i> (lead dancer) dancing her solo sequence.....	34
4. The <i>Rashdhari(s)</i> - drummers.....	36
5. The <i>Sutradhari(s)</i> - singers.....	39
6. Members of <i>Loishangs</i> watching Raas.....	43
7. Krishna and Radha in their Yugal roop.....	55
8. Radha and Gopis in a stage performance of Basanta Raas in <i>Koktumbi</i> costume.....	66
9. Gopis and Radha in Jhapa costume.....	73
10. After a Raas performance in Lebanon.....	79
11. Brochures of different cultural festivals.....	89
12. An on-going rehearsal of Basanta Raas.....	99



Babina Chabungbam

**Picture 1. Basanta Raas offered at Shree Govindaji temple in Imphal, 2018.
Young girls and women participate as Gopis. They dance encircling the statue of Shree
Govindaji and Shreemati Radhika placed at the centre.**

Chapter I

Exploring Jagoi Raas, Theorising Dance: An Introduction

1.1. Introduction

An entity- cultural or religious marks its existence when defined by a cluster of characteristics. Jagoi Raas- a repository of a Manipuri Vaishnava culture is defined by religion. More or less, scholars and cultural experts have agreed on (with constant interventions in the field) the ‘synthesis’ and ‘syncretism’ of two different faiths that marks the cultural and religious history of Manipur. This agreement gets manifested in the way Raas have come to symbolise this ‘synthesis’ or the ‘syncretic culture’. It would not be an unusual sight to see picture of Jagoi Raas dance as cover pictures of books on Hinduism in Manipur or books on Religion and Culture of Manipur or on Manipur at large. It does not end within the boundaries of pictorial representation in books. Moving images of Krishna, Gopis are often the entry point of documentaries on Manipur. The tourism brochures, brochures of Sangai Festival (an annual state sponsored tourism festival of Manipur), and the latest, the advertising boards of Science Congress held in Manipur in 2018 used pictures of Raas with its much popularised theme- *Reaching the Unreached through Science and Technology*. Funny it may sound but the ‘unreached’ was already a part of the ‘world to be reached’ through culture and religion.

Manipuri Raas is classified as one of India’s classical dances shortly after Manipur was made to join the Indian Union. Jagoi Raas or simply Raas is the Manipuri version of Raas Leela which is an enactment of the love story of Radha and Krishna. Raas Leela is the play of Krishna with his consort Radha and gopis as described in Bhagvad Purana. It is enacted in various forms like folk dance, religious theatre or classical dances like Odissi, Kathak. The themes of Krishna-Radha stories are not only taken from Bhagavad Purana but also from texts like Geet Govinda which is an important part of Bhakti tradition of Vaishnavism. The term *Jagoi* is the Manipuri word for dance even though it might mean more than what western category of ‘dance’ denotes. The use of Jagoi Raas and not Raas Leela in this work is to mark out the unique feature of the dance that germinated in the soil of Manipur even though the stories are imported from ‘outside’. Its uniqueness in its form and ways of dancing have distinguished itself from other forms of Raas Leela presented through dance or theatre. It was introduced by Mahraja Bheigyachandra in 1779 AD along with the installation of Shree Govindaji (more commonly used name of Krishna) in Manipur. The period which saw birth of a new dance is considered a turning point in the history of Manipur when

Vaishnavism became more embedded in people's everyday lives. It no longer was exclusively a spectacle but a part of the mundane. The dance has its own contribution in familiarising the Vaishnavite ethos and worldviews. The Vaishnavite beliefs system did not clash with the traditional religious system but the two merged and synthesised a 'new' religion which had components of both. Raas became a symbol and also a medium through which this 'new' culture was made to popularise amongst the masses. The new synthesis remains the essence of Manipuri Vaishnavism till date.

Manipur, land of Raas, is a state which belong to the region commonly referred to as India's North-East. It is a land inhabited by different communities broadly classified as Meitei, Meitei Pangals, Nagas and Kuki and some groups who do not want to be clubbed under any of these. This state has been popular for its decades long issues of insurgency, violence, conflict and imposition of Armed Forces Special Powers Act. On a brighter side, Manipuri women have been exemplars of empowerment who have braved the might of British soldiers. But it is also the same land where their women are treated as impure. The process the Hinduisation impacted the Meiteis- the culturally dominant majority. Initially Raas was a marker of Hindu Meitei population. In the independent India, with the establishment of Dance Academies, Raas was modified to be performed on stage for 'inside' as well as 'outside' audience. The recognition of Raas as classical dance of India and the cultural hegemony that Meitei exercised led to the upgradation of Raas' status as marker of Manipur and also of India.

Imagining sociologically entails an attempt to make sense of interaction between various 'social' elements like religion, sexuality, culture, politics that constitutes a society. Society has its historical junctures where their perspectives on sexuality, politics, religion, culture were negotiated and presented through new mode of cultural production. Introduction of Raas in 18th century Manipur as an influence of Bhakti tradition of Vaishnavism is not only a simple consequence of a religious or cultural diffusion or a new dance form created solely for aesthetic purpose. Raas is a carefully crafted cultural product in the history of Manipur which is deeply embedded in the intricate network of politics of sexuality, culture and state politics itself. It is this interaction between sexuality, culture and politics that this study intends to explore using Jagoi Raas as the vantage point. Because performing culture is not only about the audience but the performer itself since it is through performing that a sense of 'self' (individual/collective) is created. To uncover the nature of this 'self', we can look at it through the creation of a dance as an important cultural form and its relationship with inherent notions of sexuality in its form and content and the politics facilitating its production

and familiarization. This ‘culture’ synthesised out of the seamless merger of the ‘internal’ (traditional religion) and the so called ‘external’ (Vaishnavism) got embodied in Raas and it became a living embodiment of a cultural and political ‘self’ even today. So, when the contemporary question arises on whether Ras Leela truly belongs to Manipur or whether the people should disown the dance form or how far it corrupted that idea of ‘self’ is what interest us today. The history, culture, politics archived in the performance of this dance opens a new door to the on-going debate of the ‘self’ and the ‘other’. How does one understand Jagoi Raas as a rich cultural heritage identified as one of the Indian Classical dance and a simultaneous movement to disown the same? Starting from its origin as an embodiment of a new cultural form, the history that has been archived in its performing itself, the interplay of culture, sexuality, politics and the crafting of the ‘self’ and the ‘other’ are what this work intends to explore.

1.2. Conceptual Framework

Clifford Geertz’s classic article *Deep Play: Notes of the Balinese Cockfights* (1972) foregrounds a way of interpreting culture by looking at it as an assemblage of texts. Cockfights, even though it is illegal, are widespread and highly popular in Bali. The major methodological take away from this article is the way which a researcher could employ to decode cultural meanings. For Geertz, the cockfights do not merely depicts the social life nor serves as its expression. Rather it is a carefully prepared example. Through participating in this exemplary activity, a Balinese learns ethos and sensibility of his own culture. Cockfights are ‘cultural texts’ which embody what it means to be a Balinese. A simple definition of ‘cultural text’ describes it as behaviour, action, artefacts, objects etc that reveal cultural meanings. Its definition seemingly makes each and every object a cultural text because all of them arise out of a cultural context. An important feature to identify a cultural text is to understand the motives of its creation and the audience it targets. Cultural texts tell about the social life or the social reality in which it is located. The definition of ‘text’ also encompasses everything that can be read like the way written texts are read. For Geertz, culture consists of an assembly of various texts and it is the researcher’s job to read them only from the perspective of those who belong to the text in question.

Out of the exhaustive range of cultural texts, dance constitutes and important cultural texts. Looking at dance as a cultural text can also be found in work of Helen Thomas and Leseley Cooper *Dancing into The Third Age: Social Drama as Cultural Text- Research in Progress*

(2002) where they sought to assess the meanings of social dance for the groups of participants. Looking at a particular dance called Jagoi Raas as the 'cultural text', this work too attempts to explore the 'social' (cultural, religious and political in Durkheimian sense) reality. By constituting it this way, one can decode the cultural milieu that shaped the 'social life', the politics involved in its creation and an assertion of an identity through ritualistic performances. It is in performing both as an audience and performer that one learns about his/her culture. As Geertz would put it, through this dance let us see what stories they tell themselves about themselves.

Since Jagoi Raas is deeply religious and also an important part of Meitei Vaishnava culture, there exist an interdependence of religion and culture. Emile Durkheim's *The elementary forms of Religious Life* (1912) lays down an idea of religion defined by a system of beliefs and practices. These beliefs divide the religious world into two spheres of sacred and profane and thus dictating practices that maintain strict boundary between the two. The functionality of religion lies in the cultivation of religious sentiments which leads to a collective conscience. Religion thus, forms a group whose beliefs and practices distinguish itself from the other. When Durkheim described 'social fact' in *The Rules of Sociological Method* (1895), he brings in different 'things' that exist in the outside world but capable of influencing our ways of thinking, acting and behaving. Religion as a social fact thus imposes or brings along certain beliefs and practices to be followed. Similarly since Meitei dance is deeply a religious phenomenon, it underlines practices and beliefs system in the dance that the society should follow. Through participation in the dance a collective conscience and a group image is created. The overlapping of religion and culture still exist and more so in this case. Both culture and religion will be used to identify Raas since both the domain intersect one another. The Manipuri or more specifically Hindu Meitei culture is shaped by its religious beliefs to a large extent. Geertz in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973) explains how religion according to him is a part of cultural system. Both religion and culture contains symbols with meanings embodied in them. They communicate and perpetuate attitudes towards life. Taking forward these two cues, of the systems of meaningful symbols and an attitude towards life, this work sees in the dance of Jagoi Raas a tendency of developing an collective attitude towards the Vaishnava lifestyle. It embodies the symbolism of the new religion that formed after the synthesis of traditional religion and Vaishnavism. Therefore, religion and culture are used interchangeably to denote the religious and cultural worldview that the dance incorporates, communicates and perpetuates through its performance.

Performance involves range of enactment and re-enactment. Its broad range covers songs, dance, theatre, people's actions in everyday lives etc. Here, dance has been looked at as a genre of performance which took a key role in shaping an identity or an image of self. Victor Turner *The Anthropology of Performance* (1987) argues that performance is reflexive i.e. it tells the group themselves and the audience about the self it tries to portray. It reveals himself to himself as Turner puts it. Performance also has a diachronic structure with its beginning, body and end. The social performance and cultural performances are all part of a larger performance of presenting a 'self' in everyday lives as Erving Goffman argues in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1965). The performers and audience both work together to save the act and ensure that the act keeps on going. An understanding of Jagoi Raas as a cultural and religious performance is thus developed taking these definitions of performance which is reflexive, diachronic, practiced in everyday social life to maintain an image of a Hindu Meitei self. Dance thus is located as a genre of performance situated in a cultural rubric shaped by religious beliefs and practices.

1.3. Studies on Dance

Dance studies, Cultural Studies, Performance Studies, Anthropology and very lately Sociology have focused their attention on dance. The fields borrow concepts and methodological tools from one another. In *The Poetics and Politics of Dance* (1998), Susan A. Reed talks about the growing studies of dance since the mid-1980s. These studies which look at dance as a site can be clubbed into three themes as Reed categorise it. The dance scholarship contributes to comparative analyses, critique of ethnocentric and colonial categories and to situate the dance within the broader framework of embodiment and politics of culture. Apart from this, dance have been studied in relation to making of colonial cultures, constitution of gender, ethnic and national identities, the formation of discourses of exoticization and production of social bodies.

Studies of dance in Anthropology in 1960s and 1970s look at it in terms of its social function. Evans Pritchard in *The Dance* (1928) brings out the social function of dance by taking specific example of dance among Azande. According to Pritchard, dance cannot be considered as an independent activity. It is not an individual activity but a joint one and cannot be described without contextual reference of native life. Dance is both a physiological as well as psychological activity. When viewed as a joint activity, one can determine the social value and function of a dance. Although dance has claimed its importance beyond its

social function and literatures on dance signal to wide range of perspectives used to study dance. But 'dance' as a concept which mainly refers to the bodily movements can be restrictive and often carries an ethnocentric baggage. Adrienne Kaeppler in *Dance Ethnology and the Anthropology of Dance* (2000) argues that 'dance' has come to represent cultural forms that results from creative use of human bodies in time and space. There are 'invisible' underlying systems and process that shape a dance. Many cultures have adopted the term 'dance' to refer to all structured body movements. It includes the religious and secular rituals, ceremonies, martial arts too. Kaeppler argues that dance is a western category and all that seems as dance to a western outsider eye need not be a dance. Giving example of three forms of performances in Japan in different settings, Kaeppler suggests that Japanese does not have a word to identify these three cultural forms in one class. All the three have been clubbed under the single category of dance for the purpose of study by an outsider

A commonly used Manipuri term for dance is Jagoi. The language and people have adopted the term dance to indicate its various forms of structured body movements. Like Kaeppler argues, there might be a lack of term which can encompass all cultural forms which represent through body movements. But when traced back to the origin of the word Jagoi, it tells us of the underlying cultural meanings conveyed through body movements. Martial arts of Manipur called Thang- ta is also clubbed under dance nowadays but it faces discontents since their exponents want it to remain as a separate entity independent of dance. Clubbing of cultural forms thus can also be seen here. But for the lack of the term, dance will be used to refer to Raas Leela but a more localised term Jagoi is used more than dance to indicate the cultural meanings and the local sensibilities it conveys.

Dance in Sociology is a new enterprise and dance has been side-lined since a long time in this discipline. Helen Thomas in *Dance, Modernity and Culture* (1995) talks about Sociology of Dance- what is it and how to do it. she explains that the book's objective is three fold- to generate a systematic approach to the Sociology of dance, to understand dance as a feature of socio-cultural context of its emergence which also exist as a reflexive practice and a closer look at the development of American modern dance by looking at Martha Graham's works. She mentions various other works which have set to establish discourse on dance in Sociology. For example, Simon Frith's *The Sociology of Rock* (1978) is a sociological analysis of rock and the book places discussion on the role of dance in youth culture. Similarly, Janet Wolf's *Hermeneutic Study and the Sociology of Art* include a long passage on dance. The marginalisation of dance in Sociology is contributed by many factors. Since

the development of the Sociology as a discipline, it has focused on the social changes from feudal to modern societies. In an engagement with highly industrialised societies and its structure, dance could not claim its importance. It has been relegated as a feature of primitive societies. Anthropologists like EB Tylor in *Religion in Primitive Culture* (1958) and James Frazer in *The Golden Bough* (1957) have discussed dance as a part of ritualistic magic that governs the life of 'primitive' people. They also believed that dancing will become less important as cultures develop and human become more civilised. Apart from this the Descarte's dualism of mind and body has also side-lined dance. Dance has also been conceived of as a form of non-verbal communication. Human dances because they are either unable to or being incapable of verbal articulation. Explanations of dance as non-verbal communication in this manner stems from the nineteenth century rationalism or positivism which offers an evolutionary scheme of human development. This scheme often designates a lower position to those who resort to non-verbal communication as system of symbolisation. Dance and dancer cannot be separated too. It needs a body to convey something non-verbally. The interdependence of body and dance and disregard of body in mind-body dualism is responsible for scarce focus on dance as a subject of inquiry. In this dualism, preference is given to rationality over emotion, the culture as opposed to nature, idealism over materialism and objectivity over subjectivity. Thomas argues that this marginalisation is done in threefold- dance as an art which had minimal importance in the industrial world, dance as a practice which places body at the centre of its discourse and lastly, dance as an activity which is viewed predominantly as feminine mode of expression and representation.

Peter Brinson's work *Scholastic Tasks of a Sociology of Dance* (1983) explains what constitutes a sociological approach to dance. Dance has its effectiveness as a mode of non-verbal communication. This is an opposite proposition which sees non-verbal mode as an earlier stage in the development of societies. The purpose of this approach will be to ask not only how dance reflects and influences society but also how society looks at dance. Brinson highlights like Kaeppler the universality of the term 'dance'. Something which is considered dance in one culture might be just a movement for the other. Therefore the important question is not to ask what dance is, but to ask who dances, why and how. These questions will point to the cultural moorings that shape it and thus effectively understanding dance as a cultural text. Further Brinson argues that sociology of dance needs to study and understand situations which create and need dance. And these situations are born out of collective experience and underlines dance as a social fact. Dance is indeed an inevitable part of living. Judith Lynne

Hanna in *To Dance is Human: A Theory of Non-verbal Communication* (1979) draws out the need for dance as a form of non-verbal communication through which human express their feelings and emotions

1.4. Dance, Culture and Gender

The intersection of dance and culture lies in the centrality of body both. Martha Graham in *I am a Dancer* (1998) writes that the instrument with which dance speaks is also the instrument through which life is lived. She says that there are always ancestral footsteps behind her, pushing her whenever she dances or creates a new one. Her words were to draw the connection between life and dance, living and dancing. Living is to dance. And the dances are always a part of an ancestral tradition that one inherits. Her perspective on dance and dancing as a prerequisite of dance makes it crucial in understanding dance as a part of culture. Culture is also something one inherits and perpetuates even though with some modifications in some cases.

In *Looking at Movement as Culture: Contact Improvisation to Disco* (1998), Cynthia J. Novack highlights again the mind body dichotomy which ignores the body and the movement it creates. She emphasises that body movements are social realities interacting with and interpreting other aspects of culture. Dance or social dance (according to her) is a structured movement system which articulate and create images of who people are. It draws ideas and values from the experience people are part of and actions and performances enable people to know themselves better. Helen Thomas' *Dance, Gender and Culture* (1993) is an edited volume which contains range of works that features the relationship between these three categories. Ted Polhemus's *Dance, Gender and Culture* (1993) in this edited book bring out how these three entities interact with one another. He gives a simple definition of culture as the glue which holds the people together and creates a sense of 'we-ness'. When one is born into a culture, the first experience is through body. A natural way of sitting, squatting, talking is not really natural but the social body that is made with cultural norms are naturalised and presented as a natural way of doing things. According to Polhemus, culture not only includes a physical dimension but it also signifies what it means to be a member of a particular society. These values are internalised and acted out through bodies. Dance as a continuation to this, can be seen as an abstraction or stylisation of physical culture. Dance is thus an embodiment of cultural norms and meanings. The relationship of culture, dance and gender thus lies in the centrality of body. Polhemus argues "[d]ance as the distillation of culture into

its most metaphysical form- always embodies and identifies this gender-generated division of cultural realities” (pp.11). This points to the gendered socialisation of bodies through dance. He gives example of his childhood in American suburbs in late 1950s when he was taught how to dance. The dances whether ‘slow’ or ‘fast’ and other behavioural activity that framed the dance movements were led by male and female follow their lead. Later the gender and culture revolution was also spelled out in the dance floors of America and Britain where dance took a neutral form.

Constructions of female bodies through gendered renderings of dance movements have been explored widely. Dance studies have incorporated feminist perspectives and feminist scholarship has also turned their focus to dance to look at how gendered bodies are created in a cultural domain. Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble: Feminism and Subversion of Identity* (1990) introduces the notion of gender as performance or gender performativity. Butler moves away from the existing binary of sex as biological and gender as social. Sex, according to her is also socially constructed. Gender identity is not a manifestation of intrinsic essence but is formed through performance. Everyday actions, dress codes, prohibitions, taboos all work to produce an idea of masculinity and femininity. The constitution of gendered bodies is done through cultural agents which directly operate on the body. The intersection between dance gender and culture acquires prominence with Butler’s theory of gender performativity. Dancing involves training (formal/ informal/ long term, short term) and it is through this one is taught how to perform as a male or a female. This learning does not confine itself to dancing but perforates everyday lives where people perform their existence as male, female or otherwise.

Studies on dance have used this premise to build up works on the construction of femininity and masculinity through dance. This construction contains idealisation of certain characteristics of maleness and femaleness. Helen Thomas in *An-Other Voice: Young Women Dancing and Talking* (1993) tried to understand the ways of doing a sociological research in the area of gender and dance. This is an ethnographic study in a local dance project in London. She found that connection one tries to establish between the features like elegance to female dancers. Through the dance, an ideal image of a female is constructed. Dance does not only play a significant role in youth culture but also plays a role in the process of gender identification. Ann Daly’s *Classical Ballet: A Discourse of Difference* (1987) also brings out dance as an important means by which cultural ideologies of gender differences are reproduced. It is done through movement vocabulary, costuming, body image, training which

are rooted in ideas of natural gender difference. Yvonne Daniel's work *Rumba: Dance and Social Change in Contemporary Cuba* (1995) puts forth the differences in dance movements for female and male dancers. He takes example of Rumba and shows how exhibiting strength, courage and bravado is associated with men and women's dance is portrayed in a softer, subtler and graceful way. Elizabeth Dempspter's *Women Writing the Body: Let's Watch a Little How She Dances* (1998) is a break from the studies about the gender construction but focuses on how women themselves have challenged the strict traditional rules that that apply in ballet dances. Dancers like Martha Graham have moved away from the usual 'feminine' representation and contrasts it with the passive image that have always been associated with female. Work like this shows the agency of women and female bodies in subverting the norms through the same instrument which was used to restrict them.

1.5.Politics of Dance

Dance has always been studied within the socio-cultural and political contexts. A creation of a dance is often shaped by on-going politics of power and representation or dance is seen as a political entity which represents an identity. It is seen as an expression and practice of relations of power and protest, resistance and complicity. With reference to colonialism, the politics of dance saw the nature of colonial opinions of the native dances. Native dancing were seen as more erotic and colonial agents often curbed elements of dances as a part of 'civilising process'. Politics of dance is formulated in the representation of 'identity'-religious, cultural, regional, national, gender etc. Juliet McMains in *Brownface: Representation of Latin-ness in Dancesport* (2001) talks about the intentional browning of one's skin using tanning material to be considered seriously in dancing. Dancesport is a highly stylised form of ballroom dancing and usually performed in competition. This article highlights to a man- made construction of brownface to acquire approval of being a Latin and thus asserting the Latin-ness associated with the dance.

JC Desmond ed. (1993) *Meaning in Motion: New Cultural Studies of Dance* explains how social identities are "signaled, formed and negotiated" through body movements. He emphasises a need to look at movement as 'social text'. Important point to be noted in the shifts that took place within dance scholarship from 'dance' to 'movement', 'music' to 'sound' 'theatre' to 'performance' etc. Studies on objectification of dance as a 'national culture' have also been a major focus in dance scholarship. Meyer *Dance and the Politics of Orality: A Study of the Irish Scoil Rince* (1995) looks at dance as a powerful tool in shaping

nationalist ideology and in the creation of national subjects. As an embodiment of cultural heritage, the dancer becomes inscribed in nationalist histories and is refigured to conform to those histories. Handler (1998) too wrote about the objectification of dance as 'national culture' in *Nationalism and the Politics of Culture in Quebec*.

Studies done on Indian dances are mainly on the sacred practices of devadasis and temple dance and how it underwent changes to suit the audience. In a movement to civilise practices of Indian women, Bharatanatyam- a dance form emerged in 1930s was derived from the temple dances by sanitising various elements which are considered sexually explicit. This can be seen in the works of Anne-Marie Gaston's *Dance and the Hindu Woman: Bharatnatyam Re-ritualised* (1992) and Saskia C. Kersenboom's *The Traditional Repertoire of the Tiruttani Temple Dancers* (1992). They trace the relation between Bharatnatyam and original temple dances from which it was taken. To suit the taste of growing middle class, the dance had to be modified and present in a more 'civilised' manner. Sharmila Rege's *The Hegemonic Appropriation of Sexuality: The Case of the Lavani performers of Maharashtra* (1995) discusses how the sexually explicit lyrics and compositions were created by the male members and the female were made to dance. But the sexual explicitness were curbed and modified in with the appropriation of lavani in Bollywood or popular media. Avanthi Meduri's *Nation, Woman, Representation: The Sutured History of the Devadasi and her Dance* (1996) shows the changing nature of indigenous dancers as they got implicated in the changing discourse of nationalism and colonialism. Devadasis were also made a focal point of debates on sexuality, womanhood and nation. Meduri traces the change of devadasis' status from temple ritual dancers to prostitutes and dancing girl in 20th century.

Especially in India, the making of a classical dance has been seen as problematic since it involves state's own politics. JL Erdman in *Dance Discourses: Rethinking the History of 'Oriental Dance'* (1996) provides the ways in which nationalism has affected the construction of the history of Indian dance. She also discusses the recognition of by nationalist only two types of dances- classical and folk dances. Dance histories were deeply connected to the construction of nationalist histories. She raises important questions about how colonial categories of folk and classical may enact an exclusionary history as well as reify particular politically motivated social identities. Sitara Thobani's work *Indian Classical Dance and the Making of Post-Colonial Identities* (2017) charts out the varied roles Indian dance plays in shaping particular formations of national and transnational identities and

culture. The dances have been a crucial part of events in Indian Diaspora and it serves to present a cohesive image of India as a Nation.

1.6. Studies on Jagoi Raas

Darius Swann's *The Braj Ras Lila* (1975) is a transcription of a performance of Ras Lila in Northern part of India, Braj. Swann give detailed proceedings of this theatre practiced based on the story of Radha and Krishna. It is helpful in drawing similarities and differences between the Raas Leela performed on Braj and the other performed in Manipur. As far as works on Manipuri Raas is concerned, it is mentioned in most of the historical treatise as the cultural symbol of religious synthesis. But major works on Raas Leela as such can be seen in the descriptive and historical accounts of Jamini Devi's *Sija Laiiobi and Maharaas* (2010) where she talks about the first ever performed Maharaas in Manipur, how it originated and made possible. Another book is Haobam Ibochaoba's *The Pre-World War-II Form of Ras Leela* (2009) where he describes the various forms of Raas and the essence they carry. A more scholarly approach is done by Khangembam Khoni in her book *Nitya Raas and Duva Raas: The Rare Classical Dances of Manipur* (2016). Khoni discusses the two rare forms of Raas-Nitya and Diva by juxtaposing its origin and structure with the social changes that occurred in 20th century. She saw the origin of these dances outside the royal boundary as a challenge to the orthodox temple rules and authority of monarchical government. An important part of her book is her thoughts on the status of Manipuri dance today and a strong need to turn attention to the degrading qualities of Manipuri Dance and culture. Another crucial book in understanding the performing arts of Manipur is N Premchand's book *Rituals and Performances: Studies in Traditional Theatres of Manipur* (2005) in which he traces the similarities between the traditional theatre and the Hinduised theatre seen in the Raas Leela. He classifies Lai Haraoba and Raas as part of theatre giving providing notions of theatre opposed to the western definition. But in this work dance or jagoi would be used to describe both the performances. There are enormous literature on Manipuri Raas and Manipuri dance. One cannot complain about the lack of sources on this field. Starting from traditional scholar of religion, dance teachers, dancers, culture enthusiast, historians have tried their hands on this topic. But what remains now, I feel is to interpret those descriptions and move away from mere description and locate the contemporary relevance of examining a dance which occupies an important position in the cultural heritage of Manipur.

1.7. Statement of the Problem

Documentation on Ras Lila is limited to descriptions about its significance in the cultural history of Manipur and what it represents today. Understanding of an important cultural heritage cannot end with information about how it was originated, who introduced or the impact it had on its audience. A theoretical approach to situate the dance in the broad socio-cultural framework and thereby interpreting it in relation to processes involved in its creation as a cultural expression is rare. The study intends to look at dance to understand the mechanisms of society, more specifically the cultural politics, notions of sexuality inherent in the creation of the dance itself. This could answer some of contested questions on ‘identity’ and the kind of ‘self’ the dance have come to represent.

1.8. Research Objectives

- a. To explore the significance of cultural performances or dance in understanding the historical, socio-political and cultural processes of a society.
- b. To comprehend relationship between dance, culture and society.

1.9. Research Questions

- a. Looking at Jagoi Raas as a cultural text, how can one understand the socio-cultural and political processes involved in the creation of the ‘text’ itself?
- b. How can cultural forms (such as dance) be used as a site to produce and re-produce gendered bodies of femininity and masculinity and to what extent this construction impact everyday lives especially for women?
- c. How can one understand the contestations on the cultural politics of ‘identity’ represented through Jagoi Raas?

1.10. A Methodological Note

Reflexive sociology enables us to employ multiple perspectives and to constantly engage with one’s own self in relation to the issues and ideas as practical problems. The subject matter of studies around dance and its relationship to sexuality, politics and culture would be a reflexive process where we try to connect the dots between what we see and the ideas associated with it and hence understanding the issues that disturb us as a part of the society. Interdisciplinary turn in 1970s invoked multiple perspectives by negating strict disciplinary

boundaries. Cultural studies, poststructuralists, postmodernist etc came up with multiple narratives. This study will also be using historical perspective, approaches from cultural studies, cultural anthropology, dance studies and Sociology of dance while trying to offer a sociological analysis of dance. As far as sources are concerned, since fieldwork is not allowed in this stage, the work entirely depended on secondary literatures, translation of Manipuri Royal Chronicles *Cheitharol Kumbaba*, *Bijoy Panchali*. This work also gave me the opportunity to engage with lots of writings on Manipur, its history, culture, religion and dance. It would be a wrong statement to say that there are very less literature on the dance of Manipur, there are abundant writings but they do awaits a proper interpretation with a contemporary relevance and to use these writings to comment on the issues we face today. Apart from the writings, since the topic concerns a dance, I have referred to many videos on Youtube to get a better sense of Raas performed in temples. Specifically, I have relied on five long videos of five Raas compiled by Sangeet Natak Akademi as a part of Raas Fetival held in 2016 on the celebration of Maharaja Bheigyachandra's death anniversary. Interviews of renowned Manipuri dancers and experts were also accessed online and other short videos were also referred to understand the rituals performed, costumes, expressions, dance styles etc. Depending on these secondary sources, the study would try to understand the ways in which "text" is read. Looking at dance a text and trying to decode its contextual processes, it would give us an overview of the process and politics of scripting cultural texts.

1.11. An Overview of the Chapters

Chapter I is an introductory chapter laying out the basic premise of the study. It maps out the objectives, research questions and more importantly why one needs to study Jagoi Raas. **Chapter II *Embodied Culture: Contextualising Jagoi Raas*** tries to argue why and how the worship of Krishan –Radha remained a dominant part of Hinduism in Manipur. Despite the presence of many other sects like Saivism, Shaktism, Ramandi etc, the Chaityanite school of Gaudiya Vaishnavism had the maximum influence because the preaching of Bhakti to lord was reproduced in the form of a dance which enacted the love stories of Radha-Krishna. For a group of people who already had their cultural knowledge ingrained in their dance forms, it was influential to introduce a new dance based on the exisiting ones to tell them a new story. This chapter tried to give a brief background of the religious transformation that forms the context of Raas' origin. The religious contact between the Vaishanvism and indigenous religion in the 18th century was marked by synthesis of two belief systems and Jagoi Raas became the symbol of this 'new' religion. This is explained by focusing on the form and

content of the dance by drawing the continuities and discontinuities in the dances of Raas and pre- Vaishnavite dances of *lai haraoba*. Raas became the depository of Manipuri Vaishnavite culture and people embodied this new culture through their participation as performer or audience in this dance.

Chapter III *Sanitising the 'erotic': Bhakti, Love and Women's Body* tries to understand the interaction between dance, culture, gender and with body as the focus. This chapter took up the most controversial aspect of dance- erotic love vs bhakti devotion. Its enactment of love of is classified as divine and anything to do with eroticism, desire are relegated a space of profane. It marks out a sacred space for Raas and the religious ethos that it embodies. Its representation of everything as divine is brought out to be a cultural normalising of women's body as submissive as an extension of Radha- bhav. The submission of one's body and soul to the Lord gets translated into women's submission to men/husband as their lord. This impacts the everyday lives of women where they are taught to become a woman both through feminine dance gestures, the subdued eloquence in the movement, the de-sexualised costumes of Gopis and so on. These values result in the creation of feminine women who are expected to naturally internalise the role of a 'mother'. Manipuri women are considered to be comparatively empowered and an agent of social resistance. These empowered women are pictured through the lens of *Ima* (mother) as a de-sexualised bodies and the same society terms her body as impure only because of the process that makes her a mother. Women's impure body due to menstruation denies role as a Krishna and Radha and her right to touch the *pung* (drum) used in Raas performance.

Chapter IV *Beyond the Spectacle: The Politics of Manipuri Jagoi Raas* discusses the politics of Raas in the context of its relationship with the state and its status as an identity marker. Its origin is based on the Maharaja's dream where he saw Shree Krishna asking him to make his statue and offer Raas Leela. This dream, whose truth no one knows except the king, has become an important part of historical narrative. The king saw this dream during his merable times when he had to face an ordeal to tame a wild elephant to test his power as a king. This happened in the court of Ahom King who was misled about Manipuri king. This is a turning point in 18th century because following the successful taming of the wild elephant, the Manipuri king got the support of Ahom king to suppress local rebellion and defeat Burmese army who had invaded Manipur. Giving credit for his victory to the Shree Govindaji (Krishna), the king proclaimed the God as the king and himself as the messenger. Statues were made, Jagoi Raas offered with its elaborate arrangements and royal exclusivity which

consolidated the power of the 'theatre state'. Initially Raas represents the royal state of Manipur and the Meitei Vaishnavite population. With the cultural hegemony that Meitei exercised with its cultural forms, the dance became a marker of Manipur and started representing the independent kingdom in the colonial times. After Manipur's merger with India, the dance gained its recognition as one of India's Classical dance form. Now, Raas is not only a marker of Manipur but also of India as various international platforms. It also represents the India's North-East in many cultural programs organised in the name of celebrating the cultural diversity of the region and knowingly- unknowingly assigning an identity of North-East. The region in general and Manipur in particular, have had a strained political relation and revivalist groups in Manipur contest the representation of Manipur by Raas which they consider is a corruption of indigenous religion and constant re-affirmation of being a part of India by performing Raas on behalf of India. The Hindu- indigenous, India-Manipur dichotomies are used to formulate an idea of 'self' and the 'other' that is constantly created through this dance. Does Raas truly belong to Manipur? Is it an 'outside' product that got embodied in the life of people or is it a crucial part of Manipur because of the local sensibilities and form?



Sarat Chabungbam

Picture 2: Statues of Shree Govindaji and Shreemati Radhika enshrined on *Bhadra-chakra* for Raas. *Bhadra-Chakra* is the wooden platform placed little elevated from the ground. Out of five Raas, three performed in Govindaji Temple- Maharaas, Kunja Raas and Basanta Raas are performed with the statues. Raas offered in other temples have children playing the role of Radha-Krishna.

Chapter II

Embodied Culture: Contextualising Jagoi Raas

Introduction

Culture is often posed as a pool of knowledge or symbols that resides externally (as concrete objects) as well as internally (as values, morals guiding one's behaviour). "Embodying" a culture is considered more in terms of how culture gets internalised in a subject's mind. Various terms like 'internalisation', 'enculturation', 'introjection', 'learning' are used to denote the process of embodying a culture. But 'embodiment' or 'embodying' as a process itself gives primacy to **body**. As the meaning of 'embody' suggests, it is to represent something in a physical form. Dance as an important cultural form and practice links the 'externality' and 'internality' or in other words the 'concreteness' and 'abstractness' of culture. Embodying implies a continual process of internalising values, beliefs (or in general, culture) while objectifying it through body movements or symbols inscribed on the body. Dance as embodied culture blurs the dichotomy while questioning (at the same time) the common notion of embodying culture in the mind.

A simple definition of culture defines it as something which 'includes' or 'excludes' selectively (Lee, 1988). Identifying what is to be included and what is to be excluded is the same process through which one defines the 'self' and the 'other' in a culture. It is through this identification of self that an 'identity' (mostly collective) is created. The extended concern of this formation would be what and under what circumstances affects this identity formation. Raas as a cultural repertoire then becomes a medium through which identity is performed on one hand and culture is kept alive on the other. The physical body (both dancer's body and dance as a whole), constitutes an avenue in which the interconnected facets of identity- religious, cultural, political etc. are stored, preserved and propagated just as archives appraise, collect, preserve the props with which notions of identity are built (Kaplan, 2000).

Identity represented through Raas- a repository of the embodied culture is contested. 'Embodied Culture' is questioned as to 'whose culture, why and how it got embodied?' It is confronted with the cultural, religious and political discontent of a past that mis-painted the idea of Manipur.

Written historical accounts of Manipur provide information about the different Vaishnavite cults that came and influenced Manipur starting as early as 15th century. Not only cults but there were also different sects of what we call 'Hinduism' today. It records presence of Shaivism, Shaktism, Tantrism in traditional accounts, literary and archaeological data and other reliable sources (Singh, 2012). But the type of Hinduism which continued to influence even today is the Bengal Vaishnavism associated with the school of Chaitanya. Not only through written sources but successive generations of Manipuri population (Meitei to be more specific) remembers these historical events of religious influences through various festivals that still exist. The festival of *Baruni* in which men, women, girls and boys climb the *Nongmaiching* hills at night to worship Mahadeva is still observed. Baruni is also at the centre of youthful romance in many stories (Lamabam Gojendro's *Urirei Madhabi* to name one). How can people forget Shivaratri festival where one gets to savour tasty *Phola* (a kind of pudding served on this day) along with *ganja*. Durga Puja festival which lasts for ten days, Diwali, Krishna Janma, Rathayatra, etc are other festivals which are still observed. This shows that Hinduism exists in many facets in Manipur. But why of all these, the worship of Krishna-Radha could become the dominant one? Or to put this question in a different way, why do we often find pictures of Krishna-Radha on books on Hinduism in Manipur? Why does this picture seem so familiar when we discuss the influence of Hinduism in Manipur?

People of Manipur have had a love for dance and music for a very long period (we shall come back to this in a later section). Its myth and legend has it. Their entire culture was coded in its dance forms. Bengal Vaishnavism, too had a distinctive characteristic of expressing devotion or *bhakti* in the form of music, poetry or dance. *Kirtans* (devotional singing) were an important part of Vaishnavism in Bengal. When this particular religious school reached Manipur, it encountered the fertile soil where form of devotional dance and music could flourish. Thus, a simple proposition would be that worship of Radha-Krishna became the dominant form of Hinduism in Manipur or a major form of identifying the Hinduised Manipur could be due to **concretisation of *Bhakti* and religious sentiments in the form of sacred performance**. One such performance is Raas Leela. **For a population who embodied their cultural knowledge in their dances through their bodies did not take long to embody a 'new' set of cultural world through stylized bodily movements they were already familiar with.**

What is Jagoi Raas? What is the importance of Raas Leela then and now? How was it originated? What does it symbolises or represents? How important is this representation? How do we understand the claims of mis-representation through Raas Leela by some of the groups? These questions could lead us to an understanding of contradictory position that Raas Leela occupies- as an embodiment of Manipuri culture on one hand and a stubborn stain on its culture on the other. In other words, Raas Leela is both the site where a ‘Manipuri identity’ is constructed as well as contested. This chapter will try to look into some of this issues tracing back to the origin of this dance to understand the historical context. The advent of Hinduism, royal patronage given to Vaishnavism which culminated in assigning the status of official religion to Vaishnavism forms the backdrop of Raas. This religion of the ‘other’ from ‘outside’ impacted the religious life of the people as manifested in new forms of dances based on the sacred texts of Hinduism. However the adoption of new religion was done in a way to suit the local culture. This is seen in the unique local flavour that Raas embodies. The following sections gives general ideas about the common forms of Raas, when and where they are performed and essential requirements that go into organizing it. This chapter aims to conceptualise Raas as an embodiment of ‘new’ culture. ‘New’ here refers not only to the new Hindu beliefs and practices paved its way into Manipur but also the ‘synthesis’ of two cultural realities- Hindu and indigenous religion which took form as a ‘new’ culture in Manipuri society.

2. 2. Advent of ‘Hinduism’ in Manipur

‘Hinduism’ is a nineteenth century colonial construct (King, 1999). It carries a tone of Western orientalist who gave the term based on Christian presupposition. This view also disregards the role of Hindu subjects in identifying themselves with the term. Lorenzen (1999) disagrees with the narrative that indicates Hinduism as nineteenth century construct and argues that the evidences show a concrete consciousness of Hinduism in 1200 and 1500. Most of the history books of Manipur have un-problematically used the term Hinduism to denote the religious system that started to cast its shadow upon Manipur since 15th century or before. To say that Hinduism became the state religion of Manipur in 1717 could be a misleading statement since there was no single entity called ‘Hinduism’ at that point in time but a system of beliefs which comes under what we call a Vaishnavite sect of Hinduism today. There were different sects and cults which influenced Manipur. Extending this discussion a little further, the most commonly used term for pre-hindu religion in Manipur is

‘Sanamahi-sm’ (*Sanamahi* is a traditional household deity). SN Paratt (1980) writes in her book *The Religion of Manipur* that “It is so strange that so important a deity as Sanamahi is not mentioned more frequently in the earlier part of (royal chronicles of Manipuri Kings) *Cheitharol Kumbaba*” (p. 54). Paratt added that it is very unlikely that Sanamahi was introduced during Garib Niwaj’s time as new God. Its recent origin is doubtful but it must have been a part of Meitei religion from the beginning. She gives two possible explanations. One, Sanamahi was explicitly a household God and it did not play any important part in the state affairs which *Cheitharol Kumbaba* largely describes. Second, it could be because of a different name “*Taibang Khaiba*” that was used for Sanamahi. *Sanamahi-sm* like Hinduism sums up different deities and practises associated with it under a single term. Popularity of this term could also be due to the importance given to the worship and re- installation of sanamahi by pioneers of revivalism. Maharaja Labanyacahndra in his attempt to revive traditional religion erected image of Sanamahi and other ancestral lais (Paratt, 1980 p. 167). TC Hodson and H Dwijasekhar writes that there was a transition from Pakhangba to Sanamahi and the line of Pakhangba ended with king Charairongba and with Pamheiba (Garib Niwaj) begins the line of descendents of Sanamahi (Hodson, 1908, p. 80; Dwijasekhar, 2009, p. 258). Taking in consideration the contents on these terms, the work uses Vaishnavism to indicate the religion in 18th century Manipur, Hindu or Hinduism as the broader category of people and pre-hindu, indigenous or traditional to refer to earlier religion.

Hinduisation in Manipur was a gradual process stretched over centuries accompanied by negotiations, acceptance and rejection. On the occasion of a workshop on “The Raseswari and Jalakeli pala” an eminent Manipuri scholar Arambam Lokendro puts forth the question “Why did we reject Valmiki’s Ramayana and accept Kritibas’ Ramayana? He further explained that Valmiki’s Ramayana is difficult as compared to Kritibas’ which is more simply written for the people. Thus, the people of Manipur accepted only the ones which are useful to them and this is not just a passive act of receiving but it involves contribution of the people to other cultures as well.

The onset of Hinduism, in its different forms, in Manipur can be traced back to the time when Brahmin migration started. This is not to draw simplistic connection between Brahmins and Hinduism but elements of Hinduism entered Manipur along with the migration of Brahmins and their families as mentioned in manuscript *Bamon Khunthok* (The Migration of Brahmins). The manuscript records the settlement of Brahmins in Manipur. According to the

Bamon Khuthok the earliest Brahmin settlements were in the reign of Kyamba in the 15th Century and these continued periodically from then on (Paratt, 1980 pp. 102). 15th century is also recorded for the use of *Vishnu-Chakra* also known as *kwarok* or pot containing the image of Vishnu with betel nut and leaves. The period of Kyamba is also known for the statue of Vishnu gifted to him by a Pong king. A temple was built for the statue and a Brahmin family was given the responsibility of looking after. Brahmins migrated as refugees rather than seeker of wealth by serving the local king. Inter-marriages with locals led to their settlement and intentionally or un-intentionally, they had a religious impact on the rulers and people. But this is not enough to assume a strong cultural and religious influence of Brahmins at this period. As Dwijasekhar puts it, **“it was a slow process of cultural synthesis, rather than a rapid imposition of Hinduisation. Also it was best a local initiative, but certainly not an Indian imposition”** (Dwijasekhar, 2009 p. 252). Agreed that it was a gradual and slow process, in fact, it is a slow process continuing till today but to use the expression “Indian imposition” is like falling in the trap of identifying ‘Indian-ness’ only with being Hindu.

Early influence of Hinduism has also been discussed in terms of cultural contact of early Meiteis with neighbouring Hindu people. A brief text *Chingurembi Khonglup* (The Companions of Chingurembi) records marriage of Meitei king Naothingkhong and a lady described as Western princess (*mayang leima*). The text gives names of people who accompanied her like Tulsi Ram, Hari, Lokhon Das etc which denote familiarity with Vaishnavite faith. This led Jhaljit Singh (Manipuri Historian) to argue that cultural contact between Manipur and India was established at an early date and religious, especially Vaishnavite, influences had percolated through Manipur as early as the 7th century (Naotingkhong’s time). A similar story is of *Phayeng Copper Plates*. These are discoveries of an archaeologist, W. Yumjao Singh, in his excavations with royal patronage of the Raja and Political Agents. Some of them were purchased from the Loi villages of Phayeng. Yumjao records the contents written in archaic Manipuri in his Archaeological Report published in 1935. It records worship of Siva and Durga by King Khongtekcha Yoirenba (AD 763-784) and the king’s prediction of events to be happened in 1790. Paratt argues that it is doubtful to follow these narratives as it is possible that *Chingurembi Khonglup* was written in a period when Vaishnavism was already established in Manipur to claim an early date for its introduction. It could be a means to tackle other influences like that of Saivism. Similarly for *Phayeng Copper Plates*, Paratt is of the view that it could be probably writings in a later

period to support the divine kingship and to encourage worship of Siva and Durga when the influence of Vaishnavism was gaining a huge momentum. As Paratt (1980) puts it “the Phayeng Plates then tell us nothing about 8th Century Meitei religion. They are however extremely valuable evidence for the presence of Saivism in Manipur” (p. 109).

It was only in 18th century that one could see growing influences of Hinduism in Manipur. This crucial century saw reign of different kings out of which three worth mentioning in this context- Maharaj Charairongba (1698-1709), Maharaj Garibniwaj (Pamheiba) (1709-1748) and Rajarshi Bheigyachandra (Chingthangkomba) (1759-61, 1763-1798). But prior to 18th century, influences of Hinduism began to penetrate Manipur but not strong enough to uproot the traditional religion of Meiteis. Traditions of tree cults, worships of traditional lais, blood sacrifices continued (Paratt, 1980). Influences during this early period can be seen in the beginning of cremation of dead bodies, the use of the term *lai-ningthou* (*lai*- God, *Ningthou*-King) for the king. King Khagemba who ruled in 17th century began to be addressed as *lainingthou*. This is the onset of divine kingship in Manipur. This could be translated as the tradition of regarding the king as the God. The use of the term *lainingthou* continued while the same term took a different meaning during Bheigyanchandra’s time when he pronounced Shri Govindaji as the king i.e the God as the king rather than the King as the God.

Apart from blood sacrifices and onset of divine kingship, one crucial influence was the idea of idolatry. Images of Lai were absent in pre-Hindu Manipur where the lais were worshipped in the form of stones or brass masks. During 1601 and 1647, Cheitharol Kumbaba records the capture of sculptors from Kyang¹ after they were defeated them.² Since there was no Meitei word for image, *murti* was borrowed and used. *Murti* is a word derived from Sanskrit which means any form, embodiment or solid object and typically refers to an image or idol or statue of a deity or a person. Jagoi Raas’ creation goes hand in hand with the carving of Shri Govindaji’s image from a Jackfruit tree. It was not a statue carved out from a stone but from a tree. There was already a belief of *Umanglais*³ and worship of trees in ancient Meitei faith.

¹ A Shan Kingdom in Kabaw Valley

² As recorded in Cheitharol Kumbaba (in the translated volume by Saroj Nalini Paratt):

Sakabda 1524 (1602 CE): The year of Loitingbam Mayang, They were victorious over Kyang. Chosengkham, Thamung and Chawai and others, totalling 177 people, were captured in battle. They were victorious over Mawao also. Takhen Mung was captured in battle. **They also captured sculptors from Kyang.** Yipungo Kyamapa was born.

Sakabda 1569 (1647 CE): The year of Yengkhoipam Muwa. Yipungo Tonapa had his ears pierced. Yipungo Yaiching Khunlakpa Omma was born. In the month of Poinu, they attacked Monthei once more. They captured Linthak in battle. Sairem Tharoi died. **They were victorious over Mungyong and Kyang. They captured royal sculptor from Kyang.**

³ Translated as ‘Forest deities’. It is used generally to refer to pre-Hindu Gods.

The tree cult had a strong influence on people before. The king's identification of a tree as sacred and carving out an image of God out of it could well be a mixture of the earlier influence of tree cult and the new concept of idolatry.

These growing influences of Vaishnavism in and around the royal boundary enhanced its status of Vaishnavism as a dominant religion in 18th century Manipur. On 9th April, 1704 CE, Maharaja Charairongba was initiated to Vaishnavism and thus becoming the first Manipuri King to get initiated to the new faith officially. The king and some other people fasted and performed *Laiming louba* which can be translated as *Laiming*- God's name and *louba*- to take i.e to take God's name. It is done by a Brahmin Guru who whispers the name of God as a symbol of initiation to a new faith. This is an important landmark in the history of Hinduism in Manipur because it marks the beginning of royal patronage to this new religion. The growth of Vaishnavism is fuelled by the royal support. The Brahmins who migrated in 15th century did not have a huge influence on the people or the king. It is recorded that Brahmins intermarried with the local population but with only with the women belonging to *Kei* class (class of slaves who had to provide and pound the Raja's rice). But in 1738 CE, a maiden of the royal house was married to the king's Guru. Cheitharol Kumpapa records this incident as "...14th Saturday, Yipi Hidaksungpi along with Ningthem escorted Sicha their daughter to be the wife of the Guru" (Paratt, 2005 p.146). The position of Brahmins will also rise as learned scholars who guided the kings with the new religion. During Charairongba's time, there was little effort to impose the new religion on the people. In early period of his rule, temple dedicated to Meitei goddess Panthoibi was erected in 1700 CE and after his initiation, a temple dedicated to Vishnu was built in 1707 CE. The first temple dedicated to Krishna was also constructed during King Charairongba's time.

His successor Garib Niwaj's time is relatively more forceful. Vaishnavism was established as the official religion of the state in 1717 when the king, along with some others took the sacred thread. Paratt writes, "A serious attempt was made to impose it (Vaishnavism) upon the people as a whole, and punishments were prescribed for those indulging in blatant non-Hindu activities" (1980 p. 135). The school of Vaishnavism that the king adopted was that of Chaitnaya. In 1729, the king took another sacred thread and it is believed that it was another school of Vaishnavite faith. King introduced Hindu *Gotra* system which was identified with

the *yeks*⁴ and Hindu calendar. It was during Garib Niwaj's time when various temples of traditional lais were destroyed and the most notorious act of burning of sacred texts of Meiteis were. The event is known as *Puya mei-thaba* (burning of sacred texts). These were ancient texts written in old Manipuri script covering range of topics like traditional religious rites and rituals, hymns of various gods and goddesses, names of places and so on. His reign also saw the identification of older festivals with Hindu festivals. For example, the annual boat race festival, traditionally known as *heigru-hidongba* was renamed as Jala Yatra. Sanamahi Laikan, an old Meitei text, also records identification of the old kingdom of *Kangleipak* as Manipur and thus serves as the beginning of tracing Aryan origin of Meiteis as descendants of Arjuna. Garib Niwaj's attitude towards the two religious systems was paradoxical and often confusing. Initial period saw the erection of temples for traditional Lais. Worship of Sanamahi became popular again from his time. This was followed by King's initiation to Nimandi and punishment of Ramandi followers and others who did not comply to Hindu activities and way of life. Later he himself adopted Ramandi school of Vaishnavism and erected temples of Ramji and Hanuman. Amidst these contradictions, one common trend was his forcefulness in imposing the religion to the masses. Garib Niwaj was followed by three more kings who ruled for short period of time and then came Maharaja Bheigyachandra who earned the title 'Rajarshi' which means the Raja (king) who is a *rishi* (Saint). Rajarshi Bheigyachandra was a devout Vaishnava and devoted himself to worship of Shree Govindaji

Maharaja Bheigyachandra's time witnessed Burmese invasion three times which made the Maharaja and people flee the country. During their stay in neighbouring kingdoms of Tripura and Ahom kingdoms, Maharaja made allies to reconcile Burmese invasion. With the influence of Hinduism, there was already ban on the consumption of meat and wine since Garib Niwaj's time. Very different from his predecessor, Maharaj Bheigyachandra felt that it was impossible to wipe out a religious system so deeply rooted in people's lives. Therefore, one possible way could be co-existence of both faiths through careful assimilation of different elements. Sanamahi continued to play an important part in people's life and in 1778 and 1779 images of Sanamahi were erected. The Gods belonging to Hindu and pre-Hindu beliefs were accepted alongside one another. This last quarter of 18th century is well known in Manipuri history because of the developments it saw in the realm of culture. For most of

⁴ *Yeks* were traditional classification of lineage among Meiteis in the form of clans. Meiteis practiced yek exogamy.

the people in Manipur, the name of Maharaja Bheigyachandra's name is synonymous of Jagoi Raas. Jagoi Raas is incomplete without Rajarshi Bheigyachandra and vice versa. He was the one who gifted the beautiful Jagoi Raas to the people of Manipur who have cherished and took pride in this tradition for successive generations. And also Maharaja Bheigyachandra's efforts of consolidating Hinduism could have remained incomplete without the Jagoi Raas. Bheigyachandra's reign of forty years is often described in two corresponding terms- the frequent Burmese invasion and his war of liberation against Burmese on one hand and his consolidation and propagation of Bengal school of Vaishnavism on the other and hence bringing his own stamp on the religion on the other (Paratt, 1980; Ibochaoba 2009). This is the backdrop in which Raas Leela took its re-birth in Manipur in the form of Jagoi Raas under the devoted patronage of the 'royal saint'.

2. 3. Re-birth of Raas Leela as Jagoi Raas

The divine play of Raas Leela in the magnificent garden of Brindavan, the joyful moments of Gopis, Radha and Krishna inspired cultural craftsmen and devotees to re-enact the divine play in the form of dance. This story has been adopted as themes in classical dances like Kathak, Odissi and folk theatres of Braj. Raas Leela as a folk dance form was already practiced in places like Gujarat, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh etc. This folk dance is still in practice. Joyful rhythms, songs praising Krishna, Radha, often using props made up of peacock feathers, enactment of teasing are some features of this dance presented in a louder emotional state of happiness and excitement. The mood of this dance is distinctively different from the one which classifies the kind of Raas Leela originated in Manipur. Manipuri Raas Leela is characterised by its unique feature of Bhakti, devotion and gestures of submitting one's self in the service of the supreme lord. It is danced out in a more serene manner. **Even though the dances enact the same story, its form and modes of presentation are different.** Manipuri Raas Leela, in particular, culminates in its form and representation the essence of Vaishnava ethos which had a deep influence in the life and culture of the people. 'Jagoi Raas' or simply 'Raas' is more commonly used term in Manipur. **The use of this term instead of Raas Leela in this work is also to acknowledge the localised feature of this dance form which distinguishes itself from other kinds of Raas Leela found in other parts of India.** The prefix '*jagoi*' which is usually translated as dance is a corrupted version of *chukoi*⁵, *chak-koi*⁶ and *chat-koi*⁷. *Jagoi* in its current usage in everyday vocabulary is more

⁵ The attempts to avoid touching of gods and goddesses during creation.

casual and denotes any kind of dancing, be it modern or traditional. But *jagoi* used in a cultural or traditional sense encompasses the deeper meanings associated with the stylised gestures or body movements. It brings into question the effectiveness of a Western and modern category called ‘dance’ whether dance as a term or category could sufficiently encompass the cultural underlining associated with body movements. ‘Dance’ has come to represent cultural forms that results from creative use of human bodies in time and space (Kaepler, 2000). Brinson (1983) also suggested that something considered as dance in one society can be just movements for others. *Jagoi saba* or dancing was also referred to as ‘*noiba*’ (Adhikarimayum, 2013) and ‘*Anoirol*’ is an important part of its culture. *Anoirol* literally means language of dance or movement. It is a traditional form of knowledge of the art of movement that is associated with Meitei performing arts which shapes the aesthetics of traditional Meitei community life. Therefore, dance among meiteis denotes an inseparable interaction between form and content, the tangible bodily movements and the cultural meanings that shape them. This could be a reason why dance, in general, is an important component of cultural practices and particularly in the case of Manipur, dance and culture are embedded in one another and often considered synonymous. This embedded-ness of culture and dance is what one can witness in the *Jagoi Raas* or *Lai Haraoba*- the main religious ritual festival or performance which is also the backbone of Manipuri dances. With a blend of local sensibilities and worldview, the story of Radha-krishna (which is considered foreign to the people) attained a new version in the form of *Jagoi Raas* and thus epitomising the new cultural ethos of Vaishnavite Manipuri society.

There are five main kinds of Raas namely Maharaas, Kunja Raas, Basanta Raas, Nitya Raas and Diba Raas. Gostha Leela and Udukhol are also considered a kind of Raas. But the difference is that five main Raas are based on the love story of Radha-Krishna and their play in Brindavan whereas the latter two are based on the childhood plays of Krishna. Maharaas is the first ever Raas performed on the installation of the statue of Shree Govinda. As mentioned above, the reign of Maharaja Bheigyachandra saw multiple invasions by Burmese forces and they had to flee the land. It was in one of these flights to the neighbouring Ahom Kingdom that the king was faced with a task to tame a wild elephant. This task was to test whether he is

⁶ Chak meaning era, koi indicates circle, chak-koi signifies the infinite circle of time.

⁷ Chatpa-walking, koi- encircling, chat-koi meaning dancing by moving in a circle imitating the planetary revolutions around the sun.

the real king or not because a person from *Moirang*⁸, who wanted to overthrow Bheigyachandra, sent a letter to the Ahom King Rajeshwar that the person staying with him is not the real king of Manipur but an imposter. On the night before the big event where thousands of people were to gather, Bheigyachandra prayed with deep devotion to Shree Krishna and asked to bless him. He saw Shree Krishna in his dreams who assured him that he will be there to help him. Shree Krishna clad in his dress with peacock feather as headgear (*Chura*) asked him to remember this image and construct a temple for him when he go back to Manipur. Maharaja Bheigyachandra could not contain his emotions and cried out loud for he could attain *darshan* of the lord. Out of many names of Shree Krishna, he referred to him as Shree Govinda. The next day the Ahom king and people were surprised to see the king calmly taming the wild elephant which was known for its violent nature. The elephant seeing the king coming towards him, bowed down to the king himself. This is an important event in the history of Manipur which is popularly known as *Bheigyachandra na shamu phaba* (Bheigyachandra's taming of elephant) and a statue symbolising this event is placed as a historic landmark in the hearth of Imphal city today. The king came back and successfully defeated the Burmese troupes with the help of Ahom king and regained his throne. Time passed and he did not build the temple for Govindaji. A *Tangkhul* lady came to the king to inform him about her encounter with a boy in the hills when she goes to give lunch to her son. The king remembered his unfulfilled promise and felt deep remorse about his deeds. He dreamt of Shree Govindaji again and the lord asked him to construct statues of him out of a jackfruit tree in Kaina hills of Manipur and build a temple. It is also said that the entire sequence of Raas was also shown to the king in his dream. These encounters of the king with Shree Krishna in his dream are important narratives which have helped the king in his statecraft on the basis of religion. On one hand, these *darshan* with the lord successfully established Maharaja Bheigyachandra as the divine king who was a messenger of God. On the other this has been interpreted by various scholars later as the politics of statecraft used by the king to consolidate his kingship using the divine theory of king. We will come back to this in the third chapter. With proper arrangement of *puja* the jackfruit tree was uprooted and brought down. A master sculptor Sapam Lokhon was given the charge of constructing the statue (Devi, 2010). The king was not happy with the first statue and was given to his uncle minister Anantashai who took charge for its worship. The statue is still known in Manipur as the Bijoy Govinda of Sagolband in Imphal. The Bijoy Govinda temple has its importance in

⁸ The last one out of seven smaller kingdoms incorporated under Ningthouja. Overall, it is what is called 'meitei' today.

servicing the Raas to the wider public as the ones in Shree Govindaji temple was restricted to the royalty. The second statue is the one which King Bheigyachandra worshipped as Shree Govindaji. This statue was then placed in Langthabal palace but now it is in Wangkhei Palace compound known as the Shree Shree Govindaji Temple. The temple symbolises not only the religious sacred space of devotees but it is also the centre of Vaishnavite cultural life of the people and religious performances and festivals that shares a deep connection with the prevailing religious system. A total of seven statues were carved out of the same jackfruit tree and worshipped at different places. The carving of the statue was completed in the year 1776 AD and it took three years to craft the Raas with proper consultation of learned Pandits and dance gurus. In the year 1779 AD, on the eleventh day of *Hiyangei*, the statue of Shree Govindaji was installed and the Maharaas was offered for the first time. *Cheitharol Kumbaba* records the event as “At the time of Maibam Chakprani, in the Meitei calendar year 1701, on Friday, the 11th day of Poinu, Shre Govinda was inaugurated in the Raas mandal of Canchipur. The Raas dance was performed for five days” (Devi, 2010).

The performance went on for five consecutive days. Since there was no statue of Radha, the daughter of Bheigyachandra, Anupama played the role of Shrimati Radhika who was eight years old at the time of the performance (Devi, 2010). She was later known by many names. Since she was the Radhika which is like a shadow of Shree Krishna, she was called Bimbavati (*bimb* meaning shadow). She was more popularly known as *Sija Laoibi* (princess who have become one with God). Other names were *Sija Lairoibi* (the one who owns God), *Sija Laiongbi* (the one who is married to God). This is because after performing Raas, she had immersed herself in the service of Govindaji and devoted her life to the lord. She considered Govindaji as her husband and did not marry in her life. She was also known as the Mira Bai of the east (Jamini,). She is the ‘Radha of Manipur’ who gave concrete shape to extremely devotional form of dance conceived by her father (Roy). Later in life, she took in charge of one of the statues made out of the jackfruit tree and spent her life in Navadweep in West Bengal. It was called lord Anuprabhu (taking Anu from her name Anupama) and this place in Navadweep is a still a pilgrimage destination for Meitei Vaishnavite population. The current statue of Shreemati Radhika was carved out casting nail clippings and hair from Sija Laoibi in the metal. Maharaja Bheigyachandra introduced three Raas namely the Maharaas, Kunja Raas and Basanta Raas and Sija Laoibi played the role of Radha in all the three. Till today, the Raas played in the Govindaji temple do not allow anyone to play the role of Radha and Krishna but the statues of Shree Govindaji and Shreemati Radhika is placed right in the

centre platform called *Bhadra-chakra*. The other two Raas- Nitya Raas and Diba Raas were introduced during the reign of Maharaja Chandrakirti in 19th century and Maharaja Churachand in 1940 respectively. Nitya Raas is considered everyday Raas as this could be performed on any auspicious day throughout the year. Even though the song sequence of Nitya Raas was introduced by Maharaja Chandrakirti in the later part of 19th Century, it was first performed in the year 1904, the same year Manipur witnessed first Nupilan (women's war) with the initiative of the grand-daughter of Maharaja Chandrakirti, Sanatombi. Sanatombi was known as *Bor Saheb Ongbi Sanatombi* (Sanatombi, the one married to the white sahib). She was married to the then political agent of Manipur, Colonel Maxwell. Several changes were introduced in this new Raas and it tried to secularise the restrictive royal features of previous Raas. It changed the costumes and story line of Raas even though keeping intact the bhakti element. The changes are very crucial in examining the nature of social and political changes taking place in the initial years of 20th century and its relation to the status and role of women. Sija Laoibi and Sanatombi separated by centuries did have a similar story to tell in terms of their relationship to the whole institution of Raas as women. This will be dealt in more detail in the second chapter. Introduction of Diba Raas was initiated by the public even though they had to seek the permission of the king. The last two Raas- Nitya Raas and Diba Raas were performed not in the Govindaji temple but outside the royal boundary of the palace. One was performed in the *Konthoujam Yumpham* (the then resident of Colonel Maxwell) and the other in *Hidangmayum Mandap*. Diba Raas is the only Raas which is performed during the day. The main responsibility of producing the Raas was taken up by a dance Guru called Guru Akham Tomba. He was given Rs 10,000 for his effort (Khoni, 2016).

The king Bheigyachandra consulted scholars, dance gurus to craft Raas seen in his dream. The dance form was fashioned keeping in view the initial dance forms of Lai Haraoba. Rajkumar Achoubisana, a renowned dancer, scholar and a teacher at Manipur Dance Academy tells in an interview about how Ras lila was introduced. He says that Maharaja Bheigyachandra once stopped *Lai Haraoba* ceremonies for three years in the pretext that something bad is happening to the society, so there was a need to find out what went wrong in the rituals in the last *Lai Haraoba*. Then, the Maharaja called various scholars and experts to discuss the minute details of *Lai Haraoba*. After a detailed analysis of *Lai Haraoba*, *Raas* was introduced deriving the dance steps and hand gestures from the dances of *Lai Haraoba*. The stories were transported from another cultural domain through its religious influence but

the jagoi which the people watched had an essence of a cultural worldview which they were familiar with. Or in another perspective, a new and religious worldview was injected in people's lives through stories presented in the form of devotional dance and songs. Through the presentation of Shri Krishna and, gopa and gopis of Brindavan, people were transported mentally and spiritually to the world of Chaitanya. Both the performers and audience constructed a world of imagination in which they become participants in the world of Chaitanya and its followers (Premchand, 2005). Through the jagoi Raas people felt the longings of the union with Lord. They identified themselves with Radha and immersed themselves in the divine play. This intense imagination of people led them to shed tears of happiness while watching *Raas* or listening to *Kirtans*. Devotees never clapped for Raas since it is not an entertaining spectacle, but the divine play of their lord and devotees would lay prostrate as a sign of submitting their own self to the *Raas* which is a personalised play of the supreme lord. AL Basham remarked in preface to Paratt's book on the religion of Manipur that Hinduism in Manipur is still flourishing and the synthesis of the Indian and the local genius has produced one of the most beautiful traditional schools of religious dancing in the world. **Manipuri Jagoi Raas is not a simple imitation and reproduction of other dance forms but a new creation with its unique features.** Arambam Lokendro's statement mentioned earlier can be reiterated. **Developing a Raas Leela is not a passive act of receiving but it involves an active engagement on part of the locals to craft in a new different way which bears stamp of Meitei culture of and thus contributing a dance which would present a new image of Manipuri Vaishnavism.**

2. 4. Jagoi Raas and its five forms

2.4.1. Maha-raas

Considered as highest form of Raas, it was performed for the first time to mark the installation ceremony of Shree Govindaji's statue in the year 1779. Maharaas is now performed annually on *Mera Waphukpa* (a pre-Hindu festival) which usually falls in the month of *Hiyangei* (November- December, *kartika* in Hindu calendar). It is based on the Ras Panchadhyay of Bhagvad Purana. Shree Krishna decided to play Raas seeing the beautiful full moon and flowers in full bloom. He summoned Gopis with sweet tunes of his flute. Upon hearing the music of Shree Krishna's flute, all the gopis left whatever they were doing and reached Shree Krishna's side. And Shree Krishna received the gopis with affectionate greetings. The gopis were extremely proud and boastful since they were blessed with Shree

Krishna and Radha felt hurt because she was treated in the same manner as the other gopis. To teach a lesson to gopis, Krishna disappeared from the mandali with Radha, whose dedication to the lord is said to be the most sincere. Radha too became proud and to test her bhakti rasa, Krishna disappeared from the scene. The Gopis and Radha realising that pride is not an essence of Bhakti, joined together in search of Krishna. Krishna then appeared again and proclaimed that he is embedded in each of them and every gopi/ devotee has a right to him only if he is sought with pure devotion. This is also the spirit of Maharaas also known as *Ek Shyam Ek Gopi* (Krishna for each gopi). It is the essence of Bhakti rasa and all the Raas form tell the devotees to seek the lord with pure devotion and to leave behind the material world. This is seen in the way gopis leave their household work and come out in search of Shree Krishna to play Raas leela with him. It is through this play that they could attain union with the lord. Dance guru *Kabo Khumbongba* was in charge of materialising this dance. He was called upon by the king after a conference which thoroughly discussed the tenth episode of Shree Mad Bhagvad written by Ved Vyas. The conference was attended by members of *Brahma-Sabha*⁹ like Pandits Guru Sidhanta Bachaspati, Bhaskar Sharma, Shriroopa Parmananda Thakur, Shri Swaroopananda, Shri Apananda, Gourashyam Sharma and other elders (Ibochaoba, 2009: 45). In Raas Leela, Shree Krishna is considered as the *paramatma* (supreme being) and the gopis as *atma* (soul) and thus the essence of Jagoi Raas lies in the union of one's soul with that the supreme lord. It is about overcoming lust and feelings of desire. It is not a simple play between ordinary men and women but a divine play. These claims of divinity have always kept the tradition away from the discussion on desire and lust. Such perspectives on Raas is considered as not understanding its true meaning which is to overcome to material pleasures of life, desire, passion and love. The only constituent given importance here is pure love in the form of Bhakti and through this one can attain the union with the God. It is also said that the God of love and desire, *Kaamdev*, could not even conquer Shree Krishna and *Kaamdev* surrendered himself to Krishna.

There are crucial roles to be played in every Raas- role of Krishna and Radha (except for Raas in Govindaji Temple), *makok chingbi* (lead dancer, she is the one who bears the expenses for organising a Raas), *Raasdhari* (the drum player), *Sutradhari* (the lead singer). In the first Maharaas, the Queen Ngangbam Chanu Harimati was the *makok chingbi*, king's

⁹ It is a group of learned scholars constituted by Maharaja Bheigyachandra which took key role in the functioning of the king. It became very orthodox and responsible for imposing various religious taxes on the people.



Babina Chabungbam

Picture 3: *Makok-Chingbi* (lead dancer) dancing her solo dance sequence. She financially sponsors the organisation of Raas. The role of *makok-chingbi* is the most sought after. In the Palatial culture, a mixture of talent and authority decided which queen or princess gets to do the role.

daughter Sija laioibi as Radha, king himself as the drum player, and king's brother-in-law Ngoubram Sai and Dharsai as *esei hanba* (lead singer) and *duhar* (second lead singer) respectively.

2.4.2. Kunja Raas

It was first performed in the year 1784 AD on *Mera Wa Yungba* (a Meitei festival), a full moon day of *Mera* (October- November, Ashwin in Hindu calendar). Maharaas was performed on *Mera Waphukpa* and the king felt that there was a lack of devotion during the first fortnight of the month which is the starting of Hiyangei. *Mera Wayungba* and *Mera waphukpa* is a marker of the starting and end of the month *Mera* in Manipur and both the days had an importance for Manipuri People. Insert about this festival. After a detailed discussion of Brahma Sabha, they concluded to create Kunja Raas which was played at the Yanu river bed and in the kunja. It is based on the Patal Khanda of Padma Puran (Jamini, 2010: 59). The Raas starts with the episode of Krishna arriving at the Kunja and calling out Gopis and Radha. This dance has shorter duration than Maharaas. Princess Sija Laiioibi played the role of Radha, the Queen Ngangbam Ningol Harimati as *makok chingbi* and the other queens and others as gopis.

2.4.3. Basanta Raas

It was first performed in the year 1796 AD on the full moon day of *Sajibu* (March-April, *Cheitra* in Hindu calendar). It is the Raas played in spring season and the songs are derived from Jayadeva's Geet Govinda. In Maharas, Shree Krishna disappeared at the pride of gopis whereas in Basanta Raas Shrimati Radhika disappears after coming to know that Krishna went for a night's stay at Chandrabali kunj (chandrabali is another character in Basanta Raas). Shree Krishan realising his mistakes requests gopis to help him find Radha. As last the two meet and unites again. It includes Chandrabali's dance and Radha's sulking emotions. An important feature of Basanta Raas is the inclusion of "aber khel" (playing with colors as part of holi). Out of the five forms, Basanta Raas is the most common one which has been modified and presented in a shorter sequence for stage performances. Princess Sija Laiioibi played the role of Radha, Queen Harimati as *makok chingbi*, other queens as gopis. In all the three Raas introduced by Rajarshi Bheigyachandra, Radha and *makok chingbi* were played repeatedly by same person and other queens and "others" as gopis. Since it is not specified



Babina Chabungbam

Picture 4: The Rashdhari or *pung* (drum) players. A lead drummer is accompanied by two assistants who sit on his left. On the right of lead *pung* player sits the conch player (the one near the pillar with golden bordered turban in the picture). The lead *Pung* player is called Raasdhari who also take the role of teaching the dance. The conch player is a crucial component not only of Raas but of other Vaishnavite ritual ceremonies, festivals or performance. The conch is blown at a designated time signifying the beginning, middle and end of a performance.

who were included in this “others”, it is hard to hint any involvement of the common public as participants. They could have participated as audience but it is unlikely that they were allowed to dance along with the royal women. This point could be seen in the following Raas whose introduction is outside the royal boundary.

2.4.4. Nitya Raas

It was introduced by Maharaja Chandrakirti as a song sequence and presented in the Festival of 64 Rasa held in 1874-75 AD but performed for the first time on 27th July, 1904 initiated by Chandrakirti’s grand-daughter Princess Sanatombi. The princess who faced stigmatisation for marrying the Political Agent Lt. Colonel H. St. Maxwell after leaving her first husband took the responsibility of organising this new Raas. It is known as everyday Raas since it can be performed on any auspicious day. Sanatombi having married to a British was not allowed to offer Raas before Govindajee since Britishers were considered impure. It could not get religious sanction because the spirit of Nitya Raas was against the tenets and established principles of earlier Raas Leelas (Khoni, 2016: 22). The organisation of this Raas at Konthoujam Yumpham, then quarters of Political Agents and now the Governor’s residence in Imphal was also an act of democratising religion and bringing out Raas from the royal confines and hence making it more accessible to the public. Any person wanting to offer Raas could do so after selecting an auspicious day. This remained same for Diba Raas too. The introductions of these two Raas were responsible for popularising Raas among public since it was a common affair to offer Raas in village and locality mandaps. The dance and song sequence depicts Shree Krishna pining for Radhika’s love rather than Radha who always seeks Krishna’s love. The story was adopted from Govinda Leela Amrita and some of the songs were taken from Padakalpataru. The dance involves Shree Krishna arriving at the Kunja and ordering Vrinda Devi (one of the gopis) to make the *sajya* (bed) and Krishna eagerly waiting for Radha’s arrival. The main responsibility of making the dance was taken by Shree Sana Chandrahas, Thokchom Mareiba and Bamon Thouranishabi etc. The *Raasdhari* was Huidrom Oja Jhulon Macha and the *Sutradhari* was Princess Amumacha. The Krishna was played by Maharaja Chandrakirti’s grandson, Haobam Nilamani, Radha was played by Sanajaobi, daughter of Sanakhya Nityaipat. Princess Sanatombi was the *makok chingbi*.

2.4.5. Diba Raas

It was first presented during the reign of Maharaja Churachand by devotees in 1940s in Hidangmayum mandap in Sagolband in Imphal. It is based on the selected chapters from Shee Krishnaras- sangeet Samgraha (written during the days of Maharaja Gambhir Singh). This was initiated by people rather than the king even though King had to give permission to organise. This act argues, is a challenge to the monarchical institution which monopolised religious performances (Khoni, 2016: 91). It is the only Raas which is performed during the day. An important character in Diba Raas is that of Anganga Manjuri about whom very less is known. Padmashree Thouranishabi writes that that she (Ananga Manjuri) is considered to be from “Northeast” (probably meaning North-east India and thus articulating the inclusion of native character in the story of “mainstream” Raas Leela) but it is not very clear and there is secrecy and silence on who Ananga Manjuri really is. But more realistically, lady Angang Manjuri is considered to be Lakshmana in Tetra Yug, Balarama in Dwapur Yug and Nityainanda in Kalyug. The sequence of Diba Raas includes Krishna coming out with his friend Subol towards Radha Kunja and Radha meeting shree Krishna while coming out to do Surya pooja and both of them went to Ananga Ambooj Kunja where they played Raas. The enactment of union of the two-radha and Krishna in the presence of Ananga Manjuri is the core event of Diba Raas. The three dances in the centre while gopis dances in delight encircling them. In the first Diba Raas Radha was played by Salam Ningol Binodkumari, Salam Nungshitombi as *makok chingbi*, Salam Chaoba as Ananga manjuri.

Oja (teacher) Akham Tomba took in- charge of materialising the dance. Oja Akham Tomba was summoned to explain why he proposed to introduce a day time Raas. The matter was discussed in Brahma Sabha and accepted since diba raas is a raas secretly played at the bower called ambuja Kunja at Brindavan. The objective of the teacher was to promote Raas production through the devotees who were deeply immersed in prem Bhakti of Shree Radha-Govinda. Oja Akham Tomba was also responsible for orgnaising various Raas during the mid-20th century. Padmashree Kshetrimayum Ongbi Thounarishabi, a renowned dance Guru, writes that it was throught the effort of the soft-spoken and humble Oja Akham Tomba that Manipur could experience performances of Diba Raas four times a week. During 1940s and 50s seventeen to eighteen Raas will be performed in a month. Any Brahmin or Meitei families could arrange if they want to offer provided they had enough money for the



Babina Chabungbam

Picture 5: The *sutradhari(s)* (singers) give life to Raas. Lyrics of Radha-krishna love stories are sung in a devotional manner. It is with the help of the tune and mood of the song that audience immerse themselves in the *Bhakti Bhav* (mood of devotion).

production. Since it was done during the day, the cost was much lesser as there was no requirement for electricity arrangements.

2.5. Essentials and Essence of Raas: A brief note

Performance of temple Jagoi Raas is of two types depending on the location- One which is performed in Shree Govindaji Temple and the others which are performed in the premises of other temples of Shree Krishna. In Govindaji Raas, no one is allowed to play the role of Radha-Krishna but the statues are brought out and placed on the *bhadra-chakra* throughout the performance. It is right in the centre of the '*Raas Mandali*' which is a sacred area set up for a Raas performance. '*Raas Mandali*' is often mentioned in the description of Raas. In Basantaa Raas, a line says "*mandali mayaida gopi ga loinana Radha Krishna anina Raas leela sanari*" (Radha-Krishna along with gopis are playing Raas in the centre of Raas mandali). 'Mandali' signifies the divine abode of the lord to which devotees show respect. The other Raas performed at the premises of temples of Krishna (apart for Govindaji) have children (who are yet to attain puberty) playing the role of Krishna and Radha. Gopis can be of any age group. The participants are exclusively female except for some cases where Krishna is played by boys. Among the Gopis, the main role is that of *makok chingbi* (lead dancer) since she takes the major financial responsibilities of organising a Raas. She sponsors the mandali decoration, light and sound system, fees (*dakshina*) for dance teachers etc. Rest of the gopis also pay a participation fee to the Govindajee Temple Board (in case of Govinda Raas) and hires their own costumes. These costumes are hired for the day by paying some amount of money. For the first time, Maharaja Bheigyachandra gave the responsibilities to make a different costume for Raas to the *Phiribi Loishang*. *Loishang(s)* were units consisting of some members who attend to specific tasks. This helped in proper handling of the everyday service of Govindaji (*astakal seva*) and also in arranging rituals or festivals. *Phiribi Loishang* was comprised only of women and the queen was in charge of it. They carried out the task of creating a new costume with proper consideration to the earlier dress codes. The dress assembled for Krishna is called *Natabar Besh* and *Potloi* for the Gopis. Additions and modifications were made by successive kings and later in late 19th century, costumes were also made outside the *Phiribi Loishang* since there was a high demand of *Potloi*. *Potloi*, as we know today as a rigid cylindrical dress was introduced in the later part of 20th century (Khoni, 2016:100). The ones used in earlier times were less rigid and resembled somewhat to

that to Ghaghra worn in places like Rajasthan. Even with the resemblance, the compositions were kept intact with the earlier tradition with slight modification.

Like *Phiribi Loishang*, *Pala Loishang* was in charge of the *sankirtana* (devotional singing) which constituted an important part of everyday service. Maharaja Bheigyachandra developed Pala Loishang with utmost care since they occupied a crucial position in the artistic and cultural realm of Manipur. Pala Loishang also took care of Raas performance. There were two *sankirtana* groups (Pala)- Ariba Pala or Bangdesh Pala and Nata-*sankirtana*. The former was introduced in 15th century when a Vishnu temple was built for the first time. This tradition of *sankirtan* was developed further by Maharaja Bheigyachandra incorporating elements of Meitei traditional art and called Nata-*Sankirtana*. Nata-*sankirtana* till date is an inevitable part of any religious rituals, ceremonies and Jagoi Raas. Nata-*sankirtana* performed prior to actual performance of Jagoi Raas is called *Purvaranga*. It is only after completion of Natan-*sankirtana* that a Jagoi Raas is commenced. Jagoi Raas is performed by female and nata-*sankirtana* is performed only by male. *Sankirtana* was exclusively a male tradition till daughter of the king, Sija Laoibi requested her father to start a nupi pala (Pala for women) and founded Raseswari Pala. During the reign of Chandrakirti Maharaj, *Jagoi sabi loishang* was introduced, different from Pala Loishang which focused only on the teaching and learning of dance. In a memoir *The Maharaja's Household*, written by a princess and one of the first women writers of Manipur, MK Binodini writes about the detailed arrangements that go into the making of a Raas. Since it was a royal affair, it took a lot of preparation along hidden rivalries and grudges as to who gets to be the lead dancer and who takes the main role. Even though the task of teaching dance were assigned to the teachers of Jagoi sabi loishang, the royal office for Raas was organized by none other than the queen of the court, along with the senior prince and princesses of royal lineage. She writes “in the reign of my sovereign father (Maharaja Churachand in 20th century), the pavilion in the quarter of the maharani was the seat of the high culture’s rich Raas tradition as bequeathed by Manipuri’s own king, Maharaja Bhagyachandra...”(Binodini, 2008. p. 33)

After *purvaranga* (*sankirtana* before Raas), the musicians for Jagoi take their positions. They bow in respect to the audience and move towards the north-east corner of the mandali. The lead Pung (Mridanga) player takes the right side of the corner and to his left is the second pung player. The conch player sits on the right of the pung player and behind him is the flute

player. The singers sit on the left side of the pung player. The positions are fixed and they occupy this same position every time (Jamini, 2010).

There are also dance sequences which are part of every Raas. The separate dances of Krishna, Radha, makok chingbi are included except for Govinda Raas. These are called Krishna nartan, Radha nartan, Krishna abhisar, Radha abhisar etc. A dance sequence made up of four taals- tintaal, men bhusna, Tanchap and chali (Khoni, 2016: 35) is danced out and is called *Jagoi Mapop* meaning the best among the best. It is a significant part of the dance. Other sequences like Brindavan Bhangi Pareng, Khurumba Bhangi pareng, Guru vandana, Sabha vandana are included depending on the Raas. The most important part of every Raas is Bhangi Pareng Achouba which assumes the form of Krishna and his posture called 'Tribhanga' i.e. bent at three parts. Bhangi Pareng Achouba is very crucial and significant part of Raas which shows its connection with previous dance form. Every Raas will end with offering of flowers and *aarti* (translate). It is required for the participants to have vegetarian diet, a day before Raas. They are dressed in their costume and performed pooja (ritual) to cleanse them of their sins and profane body. They are now sacred and can enter the mandali. The children, after they adorn the costumes of Krishna-Radha, are human form of the God himself and devotees pray to them. It is a belief among the Vaishnavite population of Manipur that participating in Jgaoi Raas is a good act in the service of God and they can wash their sins by doing so. Therefore, it is never dancing Raas or watching Raas but rather it is expressed as *Raas Katchaba* (offering Raas) and *Raas Khurumba* (worshipping Raas). And instead of bursting out into claps and shouts, the spectators get out of their seats and lie prostrate in obeisance (Devi, 2010, p. 50)

The songs are sung mainly in sanskrit and Bengali but nowadays they are sung after translating the songs in manipuri. This long dance sequences which go on for hours have been condensed in shorter sequences to be performed on stage which is a more secular space. The most commonly performed Raas on stage is Basanta Raas with its typical feature of Aber-khel (play with colors). The songs for stage performances are generally sung in Manipuri. There have been few changes now. The expected 'still expression' of dancers in temple Raas with their eyes fixed on their fingers and a mood filled with devotion is slightly changing. Since the objective of the dance is not to please the god but the audience, which may or may not belong to Manipur or India, there tend to be added emotions and facial expressions to catch the attention of the crowd.



Sarat Chabungbam

Fig 6: Members of *Loishang* (departments) who take care of Govindaji's rituals. They are seated in the front row. Seating arrangements are very specific. There are many departments- all with specific responsibilities. The members were drawn from administrative divisions called *pana*. These are members from *Ahallup* and *Khabam pana* wearing yellow turban. *Nahallup* and *Laipham* wear red Turban.

2.5. Jagoi Raas: A potpourri of Religious and Cultural Synthesis

Cultural Anthropology mostly deals with livelihood, family, state, religion etc of a group of people. The early years of cultural anthropology was occupied by the evolutionary school which tried to label societies in an evolutionary stage. Benedict (1942) writes “the business of anthropologists was to arrange on one ascending ladder all the cultures of the world that culminated in Western civilisation” (p. 244). The evolutionary school was followed by the diffusionist school which emphasised the distribution of cultural traits. The cultural attributes which evolutionist considered as indices of evolutionary stage were seen to be locally distributed. This school of cultural anthropology enabled anthropologists to understand parts of unrecorded histories and to see how invention and sharing takes place between groups. This implies the constant sharing of cultural traits between groups and their porous boundaries. Boas, a key figure in diffusionist school also argues about the cultural traits being formed in two historical processes- diffusion and modification. He believed that the cultural inventory of a people was basically the cumulative result of diffusion. Boas (1938) viewed culture as consisting of countless threads, most of foreign origin, but which were woven together to fit into their new cultural context. Another term generally used in terms of cultural contacts is ‘acculturation’. Acculturation comprises those changes in a culture brought about by another culture. Often this process leads to the absorption of one culture into the other in a gradual fashion. Kroeber viewed cultural diffusion and acculturation as a complementary process. Acculturation is made possible through diffusion.

The religious environment in 18th century is often described as the synthesis of religious beliefs and development of a syncretic culture vividly visible in the cultural domain of performing arts. The cultural diffusion shaped the dance by mutual sharing of stoies, dance forms etc. The dance forms existed prior to Raas could also have been products of cultural diffusion among South East asina communities. Manipuri folk dances have many similarities in witht dances of Thailand, Myanmar etct. Just like Kirtans got incorporated in Manipuri performing arts, the form of traditional dancing could indicate similarities with other south-East Asian communities. The term ‘syncretic’ and ‘synthesis’ have been used quite frequently indicating an encounter and amalgamation of different religious beliefs. Manipuri Hinduism gradually became a synthesis of the old Meithei religion with its Gods and Goddesses and Myths, its Legends and Traditions, its Social Customs and Usages and its Priests and Ceremonials, and the Brahminical Hinduism with its special worship of Radha

and Krishna. Paratt (1980) while discussing the religion of Manipur in which she traces the earlier *lai*, the gradual influence of Hinduism leading to its royal patronage and all these culminating into the synthesis of the two- the older traditional belief system and the newer Hinduism. After Maharaja Bheigyachandra who was considered tolerant to both the religious system engaged in an effort to assimilate the two, another king came to power named Maharaja Labanyachandra who tried to establish the traditional religion of Meitei. He was involved in erection of image of *Sanamahi* and revisiting places of other *lais* (gods). But this revival was short lived following his assassination. After this episode situation stabilised with lesser evidences of the uneasy coexistence of the two faiths.

As opposed to religious conversion or transformation where a group of people gets initiated to a new religion and thereby abandoning the earlier affinity, Meiteis, with their traditional beliefs assimilated the Hindu beliefs and practices. It does not involve complete discontinuation of earlier practices. Till date, it is common for most of the Hindu household who claim to be Hindus to have a separate place for *sanamahi* (household deity), *lainingthou-lairembi* (worshipped in south-western corner of the house) and also perform other rituals associated with traditional deities. For a successful Raas performance, pounded rice, milk, fried paddy, sugarcane juice are offered to Sanamahi (Ibochaoba, 2009, p. 129).

The overlapping terms ‘synthesis’ and ‘syncretism’ are popular terms in religious histories and theology where disagreements on the use of the term are expressed. ‘Syncretism’ which is defined as ‘mismash of religion’ has been considered derogatory. Anthropologists like Rosalind Shaw and Christen Stewart have suggested that the demarcation between ‘syncretism’ and ‘anti-syncretism’ is that of the politics of religious synthesis associated with the former while attempts to protect religious boundaries as in the case of the latter (Kraft, 2002). Generally ‘syncretism’ denotes ‘the blending of religious ideas and practices’ and has often been interpreted as a source of religious confusion and disorder. A disagreement of this sort does not surface in the discourse of Hinduism in Manipur. Majorly, it is more or less agreed that the practices that exists today is a synthesis of two cultural worlds assembled with careful process of assimilation. This is not to say that every citizen accepts this synthesis. There are groups of people and organised movement resisting the Hindu influence as foreign and corrupting the traditional religion and practices. We will come back to this movement and discontent popularly known as Revivalist movement in Manipur in the third chapter. Many have articulated the changes that took place with the influence of Hinduism. Paratt

(1980) also describes that the synthesis in the context of Manipur was characterised by three aspects- more visibility of some Meitei lais and diminishing prominence of some, identification of traditional deities with Hindu Gods and Goddesses (for example, Nongpok Ningthou with Shiva and Panthoibi with Durga) and lastly, the incorporation of Hindu ways of worship for traditional Lais. Apart from this, one could also see the replacement of earlier festivals like ‘*Ahong khong chingba*’ as *kang chingba* or Rathayatra, *kangla echaoba* as Jhulon, *loipan* as yaoshang (Holi) etc (Bahadur, 1973 p.11). Thus, Vaishnavism practiced in Manipur gradually bore the stamp of Manipuriness (even though the term itself is contentious), adopting the Meitei culture and being modified by it. As Paratt puts it “**It is this synthesis which is today the essence of religion of Manipur**” (1980 p.179)

Our immediate task is to locate this ‘synthesis’ in Jagoi Raas. The dance was newly crafted based on the Raas Leela of Krishna-Radha. It was a new story altogether. But the form used to craft the new form was not borrowed from anywhere but were direct adaptations or modifications of the previous dance steps and sequences. Jagoi (dance) had its ritual and pedagogic significance in Meitei society. The festival called *Lai Haraoba* which is considered as the repository of Manipuri culture is entirely performed through music and dance. It is an annual festival for the traditional deities known as *Umang lai* and goes on for days. It re-enacts the cosmology and creation of the universe. The beginning of *Lai Haraoba* called *Lai Ikouba* (calling of the gods) starts with priestess (*maibi*) dancing. Every part of *Lai Haraoba* involves dancing. This is because the festival, as stated above, is a re-enactment of creation of the universe. This mythical stories and Meitei cosmology is repeated and taught to the people and children in the form of dances as a part of socialisation process. The most important dance sequence is called *laibou*- a dance with antiphonal singing representing the life cycle of the *lai* (Paratt, 1980, p. 54). It is comprised of 364 *khuthek* (hand gestures). The whole body of *laibou* has different parts of Jagoi sequence. There is *hakchang saba* (making of human body) which has 64 *khuthek* (s), *pamyantlon jagoi* (depicting agricultural activities), *Phisarol jagoi* (weaving dance). The *laibou jagoi* indicates the formation of human body by assembling different body parts, birth, and the activities one has to go through to sustain a life like cultivation, or to make clothes etc. It is this whole body of *laibou* which became the basis for developing the basic steps of Raas. *Lai Haraoba* was stopped for three years in the pretext that something went wrong during the last observance. The pandits, teachers carefully studied the dance steps and reproduced it as a new steps with new taals (*Punglon*). This is the backbone of Jagoi Raas as a dance.

Chali is an important dance sequence of Raas. Every Raas includes steps from the overall sequence of *chali* which is comprised of 27 units. Some of these units are derived from the basic footwork of *chumsha jagoi* and *panthoibi jagoi* of *laibou*. *Panthoibi Jagoi* is a dance depicting love story and union of *Panthoibi* and *Nongpok Ninghtou* (these two deities are classified as Durga and Shiva). In this dance, the *maibis* (priestess) lead the dancers participating in the *laibou* and the movement of hands sways from side to side in a prescribed manner. It starts with the both hands moving to a side (either left or right) with the palms facing upwards and little above the waist. The posture of Radha in the *Yugal Roop* (Radha-Krishna standing together) is considered to be derived from this. The popular hand symbol of Krishna (in other non-Manipuri dances) holding his flute is done by placing both hand slightly towards right side with one palm facing the body and other facing away from the body. But Krishna's posture in *Jagoi Raas* will place both the palms facing away from the body. This is again taken from the other part of *Panthoibi Jagoi*. Gopis dance encircling Radha-Krishna and the circle moves leftwards. This is in continuation to the *laibou* in which the procession headed by *maibis* move leftwards.

The ***Bhangi Pareng Achouba*** which is the most crucial part of every Raas is taken from the *hakchang saba jagoi*(making of body parts) of *Laibou*. *Bhangi Pareng Achouba* assumes the Tribhanga form that Krishna takes. It is to develop a spiritual image of Shree Krishna and draw up a religious obligation towards the Tribhanga murti. It is considered a sacred act and even sleeping child is awakened by the guardians to remain well attended with deep attention by everybody (Ibochaoba, 2009, p. 83). Similar attention and sacredness is observed during the *Hakchang saba jagoi* which shares the same idea with *Bhangi Pareng Achouba*. The *champra-okpi* (plucking lemons) and *champra-khaibi* (slicing of lemon) of *bhangi pareng* were designed after the arm movements of *panthoibi* plucking flowers to make offerings to Nongpok Ninghtou. *Lasing-manbi* (arranging cotton), *lasing Kappi* () steps of *Bhangi* were also taken from the *Phisarol Jagoi* () of *laibou*. Krishna's jumping act in the dance by raising one leg and the other resting on the tip of the toes is an imitation of *Phibul Okpi Jagoi*. Raas includes separate dance of four and two gopis in groups which is taken from *Chongkhong Litpa* and *Phungarol jagoi* of *Laibou* (Devi, 2010, p. 57; Ibochaoba, 2009). Thus, the dance units symbolising different stages and activities of creation and life form the basis of dance movements included in *Jagoi Raas*.

Not only the form but the costumes of Krishna and Radha bear close resemblance to the ones used before. *Potloi* worn by gopis has lots of similarities to the dress of *maibi*. The lower part of *potloi* is of two parts- the main skirt and *poswan*. This seems to be inspired from the two part of *maibi*'s lower garment- the usual *pahnek* and a sarong wrapped above it which is slightly around knee length. The same can be seen in the *potloi*. The *kha-on*- a band like piece is hung from the left shoulder and made to rest on the right side above the *poswan*. Another piece called *Khwanggoi khwangnap* is tied to bind the other pieces in place and is seen hanging in the front. This arrangement of *Kha-on* and *Khwangnap* has close resemblance with the way in which *maibi* wears *enaphi* (a cloth) and *khwangchet* as a waistband. Krishna wears golden-orange dhoti (*sana-pheege*) and gopis wears red *potlois* except for Radha who wears a green *potloi*. The golden and green of Krishna and Radha symbolises the creator Krishna as the sun and source of all energies and Radha as the earth who is the nurturer of the creation. This symbolism follows the meitei cosmology wherein the sky is considered the father and the earth as the mother. It is union of the two which creates the universe. As stated above, the *potloi* worn by gopis is also known as *kumin potloi* and another costume called *poswan* surrounds the waist. *Poswan* is bordered with brass and mirror works which makes it rigid and foldable. The number of curves of *poswan* for Radha is nine and only seven for Gopis (Bahadur, 2011 p.41). The significance of the number- nine and seven could be that of the nine *lainingthou* (Gods) and seven *lainuras* (Goddess) whom the supreme God *Guru Sidaba* produced during the creation of the universe. It is also believed that the *lainingthou*(s) were created from the right side and *lainura*(s) from the left side of *Guru Sidaba*. The symbolism of left and right is still maintained in Raas as a continuation from Lai Haraoba tradition. Left is meant for women and right for men. Krishna occupies the right whereas Radha the left position in their *Yugal Roop*. Due to this, wives are referred to as *oi ki lamdang oiba* (left counterpart) and husbands as *yet ki lamdang* (right counterpart). One cultic objects used in *lai ikouba* (calling of the lai) in Lai haraoba are *khayom* which is wrapped around with layers of banana leaf and tied with nine bamboo strands for *lainingthou* (God) and handled with the right hand and *khayom* for *lairembi* (goddess) is tied with seven bamboo strips and handled with left hand. The significance of the number seven and nine is exactly used in the curves of *poswan* for gopis and radha. Here, since *poswan* is worn only by the female, Radha's nine curves could be symbolising her as superior position to the gopis as the one who is as divine as the Lord himself. This can be seen in all the duet dances of Manipur. The traditional folk dance of Khamba(male)-

thoibi(female) dance assigns the same position. In a marriage ritual too, the bride is seated on the left on the bridegroom.

Coming back to potloi, the borders are decorated by applique design known as Khoi charong- a detailed circular pattern and this same pattern is used in the border of *Phanek* (traditional lower garment). The veil used in Maharaas, Kunj Raas and Basanta Raas were also in imitation of the *maibi(s)* veiling themselves during *lai nupi thiba* (God's search for companions)of Lai haraoba. New elements kept on adding up in the costumes with successive kings. Not only in the visible form of costumes and dance steps were the old re-fashioned into the new but the continuation of religious and cultural sentiments can also be brought out.

In Lai Haraoba, dances are offered to the deity for the prosperity of the community. It is called *Thougal Jagoi* meaning a dance offered in the service of the deity. Similar essence is maintained in Jagoi Raas where the word *Jagoi katpa* (offering of Raas) is used to imply service to the God. In *thougal jagoi*, initial part of the songs is referred to the God and audience to accept the dance being offered to them and to pardon mistakes committed while performing since they are not trained dancers. Similarly, Guru Vandana and Sabha vandana is sung requesting audience to excuse mistakes during the performance. Anyone can participate in the Raas since dancing talents are not necessarily a compulsory requirement. Rather it is the devotional sentiments that are called for.

Therefore, Raas in its form and content serves as a melting pot of two cultural and religious systems and symbolise the 'synthesis' which is the essence of Manipuri version of Vaishnavism.

2.7. Embodying a 'new' culture

Bohannan (1992) argued that Culture is created from time to time, but it is performed all the time. Once it is created, constant performance keeps the culture alive. He adds that culture can be stored in the form of artifacts and writings; it can be remembered in peoples' heads. But to be living, vital culture, it has to be performed constantly. Performance of a new cultural form informed by a set of new beliefs and stories became very important for the people who were newly getting introduced to the new system of beliefs and practices. Even though Manipur records coming of Vaishnavism in different forms since 15th century, worship of Radha-Krishna still continues to be the most famous ones may be because it got

'embodied' in people's mind and body through performance. It did not occur in the distant spectacular realm but became a part of the mundane experience through performance. It has been argued by various scholars that culture as performance is not so limited and in fact is quite consistent with the idea that body and mind are mutually constitutive and that much of conceptualisation is embodied in the sense that it is structured by physical experiences or written on the body by rituals and other spectacular or traumatic collective performances (Palmer and Jankowiak, 1996). Common saying regarding Raas of earlier times is that the people watching the performance used to cry seeing the drama of love and separation enacted by Krishna and Radha through performer's body. It is interesting how people can cry when the song is sung in Bengali or sanskrit, a language alien to them, a story which is totally new. Dissolving oneself into the tunes and drama, grasping the emotions being played out takes a great deal of imagination i.e. invoking certain scenes and images in mind. Palmer and Jankowiak argue that the meaning of performance is the 'imagery' (particular construal of scenes) that it enacts and evokes. The meaning of experience is its own imagery, with which it is entirely co-extensive. Defining experience in terms of mental imagery could be used to explain the emotional reaction of the people to the performance. They roughly know the story that it is the love play of Radha and Krishna but they also add their own nuances and hence constructing their own 'imagery'. The dance came up during the heights of Bhakti tradition of Vaishnavism. The most common 'imagery' that people could evoke would have been that of devotion and union with the lord himself. Throughout the performance, there exist only two poles- the lord and the devotees. Being male, female, old all subsumes under being a 'devotee' and the only quest becomes the union with the God. The people identify themselves with Radha and Gopis and transfers themselves to the ecstatic play of the lord. In Maha Raas (one of the five types), Krishna plays his flute and the entire village is filled with his lovely tune. Hearing that gopis cannot contain themselves and all came at night in search of that mesmerising tune. The song says that those gopis who could not come out at night due to their obedience to their husband and elders also sent their souls in search of Krishna. Krishna asks the gopis to go back since it is very late at night but the gopis requested him to let them stay and perform raas leela. In our deeply patriarchal society, Radha and Gopis who came out leaving behind their husbands and families become acceptable. It is said that leaving everything behind and not caring about what people would say symbolises the renunciation of worldly pleasure and pain only to be united with the God. People witnessing the performance perceive themselves as Radha who have come to unite with the lord. There is an active participation of the people during the whole length of the performance. It is not in the

ordinary sense of the performance where there is a divide between the audience and performers. Even though the two are spatially divided, they are emotionally and spiritually one and the same. Watching a Raas Leela performance could be very different for one who feels a sense of belongingness to the performance and the one who witnesses it as an aesthetic product. Therefore, in this case, I would like to point out that the wall between audience and performer diminishes while everyone becomes performer in some sense or the other. The only difference is that some are actively performing using their bodies to recreate the stories and the others performing passively as a faithful devotee by receiving the stories through their senses.

Performing culture is crucial since it is 'reflexive' for the performer as well as the audience. It is through performing that a sense of 'self' (individual/collective) is created (Turner, 1987). Geertz argue that Balinese cockfight is one important site to decode what 'being a Balinese' means. Jagoi Raas' performance is crucial to inform the participants- both the dancer and audience to develop and inform a new kind of Vaishnavite 'self'. The emotions aroused in the people while watching the performance is possible only because they have come to embody that culture. They have owned up the values that come with it. And this embodied culture which symbolises the fusion of the new and old belief system has been archived in people's body through performance. Jagoi Raas thus becomes the living culture and also an archive which tells us what went through to construct an idea of Manipur and the sense of self that comes with it.

Use of culture and religion here is not synonymous but an underlying assumption is that of religion as a cultural system as argued by Clifford Geertz (1973). The influence of Vaishnavism casts its shadow on the cultural aspects of Manipur and hence changing or creating a new cultural outlook as the result of the 'synthesis'. Whatever the changes may be, it implicates different kind of socialisation of the people to the new cultural system. A common body language- which is slightly bent forward and the right hand stretched outward is a polite way of asking others to make way for you. New gestures which claimed their position in everyday mannerisms of Meitei society was a result cultural socialisation. It was done not only through the dance separately but the whole system of expected behaviours and norms surrounding Raas impacted everyday life

Culture is often posed as a pool of knowledge or symbols that resides externally (as concrete objects) as well as internally (as values, morals guiding one's behaviour). "Embodying" a

culture is considered more in terms of how culture gets internalised in a subject's mind. Various terms like 'internalisation', 'enculturation', 'introjection', 'learning' are used to denote the process of embodying a culture. But 'embodiment' or 'embodying' as a process itself gives primacy to body. As the meaning of 'embody' suggests, it is to represent something in a physical form. The intersection between culture and dance also lies in the centrality of body as argued by Ted Polhemus (1993). According to Polhemus, the first cultural experience is corporal. It is through bodily manipulation that one learns the foundation of being a member in a particular society. It shapes the personal, social and cultural identity too. With its deep relationship with dance as a medium of cultural transmission, it is not uncommon to see elders often teaching tiny tots the basic steps of Meitei Jagoi. The sounds of Ta-din to which the little hands respond to with rhythm-less rhythm of closing and opening of palms is the starting point of socialisation into Meitei culture through dance which will also to become her/his cultural identity. Polhemus adds that culture not only includes a physical dimension, it is a physical style system which signifies (embodies) what it means to be a member of a particular society. He also mentions the work of anthropologist like Mead who have worked among Balinese to show that a particular way of holding one's body, of relaxing, of squatting, of walking and so forth is the very essence of being a Balinese (Polhemus, 1993). Therefore, dance as an important cultural form and practice links the 'externality' and 'internality' or in other words the 'concreteness' and 'abstractness' of culture and presents it as a continual process of internalising values, beliefs (or in general, culture) while objectifying it through body movements or symbols inscribed on the body.

A simple definition of culture defines it as something which 'includes' or 'excludes' selectively (Lee, 1998). Identifying what is to be included and what is to be excluded is the same process through which one defines the 'self' and the 'other' in a culture. It is through this identification of self that an 'identity' (mostly collective) is created. The extended concern of this formation would be what and under what circumstances affects this identity formation. Raas, as a cultural repertoire, then becomes a medium through which identity is performed and hence keeping alive the culture. A notion of one's identity is kept alive in dancing out or performing the embodied culture through its physical manifestation as a dance.

Durkheim argues in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912) that

Religion is eminently social. Religious representations are collective representations which express collective realities: the rites are a manner of acting which take rise in the midst of assembled groups and which are destined to assign, maintain and recreate certain mental states in these groups. So, if the categories are of religious origin, they ought to participate in this nature common to all religious facts: they too should be social affairs and product of collective thought (p. 10).

The collective realities that are expressed as a form of religious collective representation can be conceived as culture itself. Taking this argument further, religion among Meitei society is deeply social and its manifestation can be seen in how *lai-haraoba* was celebrated and dance forms and rituals associated with it. Similar features, though not entirely, can be seen in *ras lila* too. Erving Goffman (1956) discussed how a community or group with its distinct self represents themselves in everyday life. If we consider Meitei as a group with its distinct identity and certain kind of self it wants to project, then we should also be aware of what forms of representation are we talking about in this context. The representation of Meitei 'self' can be seen in the way they celebrate their festivals, dresses, customs, traditions. These are all aspects of performances put up in social spaces to create their own unique identity. This is where the importance of 'dance' comes in as a representation of a 'collective self' and as a means of harvesting a 'collective conscience'. When Hinduism was brought in Manipur as a religion, it was more to do with a new way of life. Earlier also, the religion in the context of Manipur was deeply embedded in social life. So, what was needed during transformation was to uproot the existing collective conscience and replace it with another by entirely changing the 'presentation of self'. The tradition of *wari liba* (reading of epic like Mahabharat) is an example to show how a practice was initiated to make the people accustomed to a story which they are not related to. These stories as we see, is more concerned with life. The story may be about figures like Krishna, Arjun with whom the people had minimal relation (not to negate the theory of Indo-Aryan origin of Manipur) but more focus was given to the essence of the stories concerning life and its problems that every human being faces. This way, they target the emotional aspects of people by helping them solve many of their existential questions. In *Ras lila*, the invocation of Krishna and Gopis is something the people are completely alien to, but the devotion to a supreme being which has already been there, has been used to enforce the new kind of devotion. Religion and culture meets in Jagoi Raas. Geertz's have elaborated how religion can be seen as culture. This is to

identify the interaction between the two which is often ignored. In most of the cases religion and culture denote one and the same thing even though they are not the same. A dance based on religious system came to be identified as a marker of Manipuri culture.

Conclusion

Introduction of Jagoi Raas is not simply about aesthetic enhancement of Manipuri Vaishnavism but also a way of crafting a new cultural worldview, a cultural system and a cultural identity. The embodiment was done through dance and other performing arts such as devotional singing, story-telling by constituting them as a part of religious ceremonies and calender. What could be consequences of this embodiment? What is the nature of identity that gets shaped through this embodiment? One's body is carved with a new cultural identity. The same body is questioned by revivalists. Whether one should abandon this body altogether or accept it considering what it has done by presenting its own self in a certain way?



Source: Online (epao.net)

Picture 7: A stage performance of Raas. Every dance culminates in Krishna-Radha taking their *yugal roop* (couple form) in the centre. The gopis and audience (in temples) pay devotion to this couple form. This form symbolises the divine union which gets translated into the union of devotees with their Lord through Radha. Shree Krishna stands on the right side in three bent form called *tribhanga*. The right and left have been assigned to male and female dancers respectively in every Manipuri dance which have both male and female. The right and left have its meanings and symbolism.

Chapter III

Sanitising the Erotic: Bhakti, Love and Women's Body

3.1. Introduction

Bhakti, in Hinduism or Vaishnavism, generally refers to devotion to, love for, a personal God or a representational God by a devotee. The interesting mix of love, romance, eroticism and devotion in the story of Radha and Krishna has resulted in a tug of war between the claims and counter claims of what Bhakti really entails. Love in the name of bhakti or bhakti in the name of love? Bhakti is the underlying feature of devotional performances in general and Manipuri Raas in particular. The proponents of Jagoi Raas engage in a full time effort to abandon all that has to do with the 'erotic', 'romantic' components of stories and emphasise the bhakti as the purest form of love and devotion. The evident jerk between *love in the name of bhakti* and *love in the form of eroticism and romance* speaks of a discomfort in owning up certain things by classifying it as something opposed to sacred. Even though the fundamental basis of Bhakti is love, it is channelized through devotion which helps one in spiritual union with the supreme Lord. Love is 'sanitised' and re-moulded in a de-sexualised form which draws itself away from its material definitions of desire, passion and eroticism. In this act of sanitisation, since Raas is performed by women (except for some cases in which boys play the role of Krishna), a de-sexualised female body is constructed. Body, since it lies in the intersection of culture, dance and gender are differently constructed. Body is the instrument of a dancer and the first medium of cultural socialisation. When one is taught how to sit in the way people of their culture do, a girl is taught not only how to sit but also how to sit as a woman. It did not occur only within the boundaries of Raas mandali but it penetrated into the everyday lives and societal norms that ultimately established conventions on women's body and her sexuality. It is inevitably a gendered feminine body which is crafted and the dance movements enhanced the socialisation of girls in their feminine roles. But does one need to stick to the monolithic notion of femininity created through this dance discourse heavily influenced by Hindu ideals or engage in an effort to question these categories?

This chapter will try to understand different shades of love, eroticism, romance and especially bhakti as a form of love which claimed its importance in Vaishnavism. Its importance got reflected in many performance genres especially in Jagoi Raas which originated during the pinnacle of Vaishnavite influence in Manipur. The main focus would be to understand how underlying elements of love and eroticism were sanitised in order to present a religious love

in the form of devotion in Bhakti tradition. The religious sentiments of Bhakti got manifested in the dance which occupies an important position in the cultural domain. The sanitisation can be seen in terms of how certain aspects of dance like costume, songs, gestures and body movements were crafted to evoke a de-sexualised cultural item. However, these attempts do not cover the implicit sexual undertones in its form and content. It is thus important to look at these undertones and see if one could see traces of love and eroticism and compare it to earlier dance forms and narratives which existed prior to Raas. It is through this comparison of traces that one can understand the impact of 'sanitisation' process on the construction of sexuality especially female sexualities and construction of female bodies. This would enable one to locate women in the new cultural reality that the people willingly or unwillingly embodied. The new religious worldview carried its notion of how a Hindu woman should be. The recipient community of Vaishnavite ideals did have their own Meitei women image. Was there any clash of these ideals or the two seamlessly merged with one another and thus arriving at a 'synthesis' and a new image of a Meitei Hindu woman. Raas would be used again as an entry point to comment on the nature of love, sexualities especially construction of female bodies especially an 'impure' body and the impact of these processes on the position that women occupy in the Meitei society.

3.2. Bhakti as the essence of Vaishnavism and Jagoi Raas

Bhagvad Purana, a Hindu sacred text, lists numerous *slokas* whose underlying theme is that of Bhakti. It is the pure devotion and selfless service which accomplishes one's yearning to be one with the God. Love is painted only with a religious fervour or the phrase 'divine love' is preferred over the love of materialistic world which is considered to be accompanied by bodily passion and physical desire. Mira Bai's love for Krishna even though she regards him as her husband is divine and nothing can pollute her dedication to her Lord. One character which is featured repeatedly in the initial stages Raas in Manipur is Sija Lai-oibi- Maharaja Bheigyachandra's own daughter. After she took the role of Shreemati Radhika in the three Raas, she considered Govindaji as her husband and dedicated her life in his service. Thus, one of her name is also *Sija Lai-ongbi* (princess who is married to the God). The list does not end with Mira Bai and Sija Lai-oibi also known as the 'Mira Bai of the East' (Devi, 2010). There are other names such as Adala, Jayadev who attained *darshan* and connection with Shree Krishna because of their deep pure Bhakti. The character of Jayadeva is interesting and of much important here. He is the one who wrote Geet Govinda in 12th century which is a text of erotic poems describing the love of Krishna and Radha. Geet Govinda was also a main text

consulted to prepare song sequences of Basanta Raas and many other Manipuri Classical Solo dances in the 20th century.

Devotional singings called *kirtans* were also a crucial part of Bengal and Oriya Vaishnavism. Assam which also came under the influence of Vaishnavism developed their Kirtans praising the beautiful features and deeds of the Lord. Bhakti movement of Vaishnavism itself is significantly marked by its propagation through devotional songs, music and performing arts. This notion of love in the name of Bhakti was well transported to Manipur in the new forms of performing arts that developed during 18th century mainly Sankirtana and Jagoi Raas.

The essence of Raas is Bhakti Rasa. Rasa is defined as emotional states in Natyashastra, an ancient treatise on Indian performing arts. It gives eight types of Rasas and Bhakti is not included in it. According to Natyashastra, Raas is embodiment of multiple Rasas like Shringara Rasa, Hasya Rasa etc but majorly of shringara rasa which denotes love and desire. Since these are emotional states, it is felt and experienced through active or passive participation. Bhakti is defined as a 'mood' different from 'sentiment' which is the Rasa. So the mood or theme of Raas is considered Bhakti usually expressed as *Bhav*. And Bhakti, in any case is detached from the Shringara Rasa which we can see in the stories. Raas Leela, as experts say, is the play (Leela) of different Rasa (emotions), all the emotions that excites the states of happiness. The 'pleasure' though is kept away even though the stories seem to constantly indicate to it. Any interpretation invoking 'pleasure' is considered disrespectful in the Manipuri Vaishnavite society. Offering of Raas by devotees in their courtyard is to prepare their own Brindaban. They offered Raas in their pavilion and a part of sacred area wher Raas was played is cordoned off. When he/she dies the dead body is placed in this fenced area before cremation and it is considered that the soul has achieved Brindaban which symbolises union with the Lord. In a workshop on Raseswari and Jalakeli Pala (two old traditions of women Sankirtan of Manipur), A Chitreswar Sharma, a scholar and also a devout Vaishnavite and member of Govindaji Temple Board expressed his dissatisfaction over such interpretation. He holds the view that the relationship of Radha and Krishna is devoid of any lust and physical desire. It is the purest form of love. He considers erotic representation of this relationship as 'nonsensical'. Similarly, Devi (2010) also expressed that Raas is not just a play between normal human beings but a divine one. This could be a reason why only children below puberty were allowed to play the role of Krishna and Radha. They are considered pure at this stage especially for girls since they will be polluted with their monthly flows post puberty. With this emphasis on 'bodiless body' (a body devoid of bodily

desires) and emasculated pleasure, love is made divine through Bhakti. Within this tradition love 'arouses' or 'made to arouse' bhakti.

It is not uncommon to see moral policing in Manipur where people engaging in adultery or intimate acts (including consenting adults) are publicly humiliated. They are sometimes painted black, made to put on sandals (footwear) garland or used tin-container garlands etc and carried in a short procession in the locality. Youtube has many of those videos for reference. In one of such videos, hair of a middle aged woman was shaved off by the moral vanguard of the locality (mostly women). In another video, consenting adults were caught half dressed, engaged in an intimate act by the cameras of student groups raiding dingy rooms of restaurants. The only objective of their raids is to hunt down these people whom they consider as moral pollutants and to teach them lessons. Right to privacy collapses in the name of safeguarding morality.

But the same society accepts and prays to the Raas leela played in the full moon night. Krishna, with his charming tunes of his flute, draws the gopis towards him and engages in deep plays of divine love. Radha, who is also married, comes out at night only to be united with the Lord. Radha's leaving behind of her husband and family is also interpreted as leaving behind the materialistic world to become a part of the spiritual world. The union though is the divine union and not to be mistaken with the 'union' we are familiar with. Stating this is neither to question Radha's character nor a plea to accept women humiliated by public as moral pollutants. But it is an attempt to draw attention to the double standards that the society holds. The deification of Radha-Krishna's love story and its unquestioned acceptance as an epitome of Bhakti led to de-sexualisation of bodies especially that of female bodies. Therefore, elements of eroticism, passion, desire, which are overlapping with love in common parlance, are subtracted from love and the only way to love is propagated in the name of bhakti- love of god and a pure devotion. This is how 'erotic' love is sanitised and presented in the one dimensional form of Bhakti. 'Erotic' love is used here to highlight the stark differences between two sacred Texts Bhagvad Purana and Geet Govinda. Both describe love and the ways to attain Shree Krishna. One is love in the name of Bhakti (Bhagvad Purana) and the other bhakti in the name of Love (Geet Govinda). Both these texts were consulted to create Jagoi Raas but the erotic elements of Geet Govinda is nullified even though the songs dance sequences implicitly enact it. The ultimate goal of Bhakti is the union with Shree Krishna.

3.3. Union as enacted in Raas and pre-Raas dances

It is the Krishna-Radha in their *yugal roop* (couple form) which is worshipped. The sequences of Raas start with Krishna calling out gopis with his flute, their meeting in the groves of Brindaban and playing Raas Leela. The union of Radha-Krishna is called *sambhog* in Raas which is followed by *swadhin*. Sambhog means sex and swadhin means independent or free. *Sambhog* is presented in a non-sexual union as the union of souls which results in swadhin i.e. the liberation of soul from the worldly pleasures. Just as love does not connote the love used in general terms, the union is also not the union of bodies but of souls. The whole performance, then, is centred around the union which can be achieved only through Bhakti. When Radha is restless in search of Krishna or suffers with the pain of separation, the devotees imagine themselves in the same state. The union of Radha with Krishna is the union of devotees themselves. Thus, the *yugal roop* is worshipped as a divine form of love. The essence of song sung in the Bhangi Preng Achouba in Maharaas is the submission of gopis to the Lord and a request to always remain in their hearts. In Basanta Raas, a character called Chandrabali is included with whom Krishna plays Raas leaving behind Radha. Shree Krishna returns with all the evidences of being in union with Chandrabali. On seeing this, Radha leaves him through her shattered pride without heeding the request of the lord. Krishna takes help of the Gopis to convince Radha to meet him as he is suffering because of separation from her. The climax of Basanta Raas is happy get-together of Radha and Krishna.

The feelings of distressed Radha are written in Geet Govinda of Jayadeva. Geet Govinda is basis for many other performances like Kathakali of Kerala, religious art of temple dances like Maharis which is performed before Lord Jagannath of Orissa. Their singing or performing parts of Geet Govinda is considered as the highest form of devotion by the pious Hindu devotees (Miller, 1977). Miller have translated the poems of Geet Govinda. Here is one stanza from her translation:

*My heart values his vulgar ways,
Refuses to admit my rage,
Feels strangely elated,
And keeps denying his guilt.
When he steals away without me
To indulge his cravings
For more young women,*

*My perverse heart
Only wants Krishna back.
What can I do?
(p. 80)*

Geet Govinda has stanzas after stanzas like this describing the meeting of Shree Krishna and Radha at night, their plays, passion and all the things one would simply call 'erotic'. It is the same text which forms the basis of many devotional genres which shuns all explanation that has to do with 'eroticism'. It is divine and this love and union is devoid of the 'erotic' element as any lay person would see it. It is only pure devotion to God that once can realise what love for God means. Without the pure Bhakti, one is trapped to conceive only in terms of bodily desire and passion. Here are more lines from Geet Govinda expressing Radha's longing for Krishna:

*While her body lies in sick
From smoldering fever of love
Her heart suffers strange slow suffocation
In mirages of sandalbalm, moonlight, lotus pools.
When exhaustion forces her to meditate on you,
On the cool body of her solitary lover,
She feels secretly revived_
For a moment the feeble girl breathes life.*

*She found your neglect in love unbearable before,
despairing if you closed your eyes even for a moment.
How will she live through this long desertion,
Watching flowers on tips of Mango branches?*

(Miller, 1977 p. 89).

It is not only Radha who longs for Krishna. In Basanta Raas, when Radha leaves Krishna for staying with Chandrabali, Krishna requests Radha's friends to convey his longings for her. In Nitya Raas too, even though Krishna awaits Radha and suffers in deep longing for Radha. Following is another stanza from Geet Govinda expressing Krishna's yearning for Radha.

*He dwells in dense forest wilds,
Rejecting his luxurious house.*

*He tosses on his bed of earth
frantically calling your name.
Wildflower-garlanded Krishna
Suffers in your desertion, friend.*

*Madhava still waits for you
In love's most sacred thicket
Where you perfected love together.
He meditates on you without sleeping,
Muttering a series of magical prayers.
He craves for the rich elixir that flows
From embracing your full breasts.*

(Miller, 1977, pp. 91-92)

Longing for one another is explained in Bhakti tradition as longing for God. It is an emotion devotees go through and thus the union as seen in the yugal roop becomes a sacred entity for followers to worship as their own union with the God. Jayadeva composes poems to describe this union. He writes

*Two lovers meeting in darkness
Embrace and kiss
And claw as desire rises
To dizzying heights of love.
When familiar voices reveal
That they ventured into the dark
To betray each other,
The mood is mixed with shame.
As you cast your frightened glance
On the dark path
As you stop at every tree,
Measuring your steps slowly,
As you secretly move
With love surging through your limbs,
Krishna is watching you, Radha*

Let him celebrate your coming.

(Miller, 1977, p. 94)

The essence embodied in *sambhog* is derived from these words even though presented in a different way. Jayadeva's text since it describes eight moods mentioned in shastras is an inspiration for many classical dance compositions. He also popularised the Tribhanga (bent threefold) posture of Krishna.

In Nitya Raas, Krishna waits for Radha eagerly. He asks a gopi named Brinda what can be done to draw Radha closer to him. Brinda replies that he is capable of charming the world through your flute, why should he worry when he possess such a flute. He can call her through his sound of flute. When Radha arrives, she tells Krishna that she does not lose a single grain of his thought even while drinking and sleeping too. She wishes not to return to her home, she has become the scandal subject but she does not have any fear. This is translations of parts of song sung in Nitya Raas. Their union is expressed in the song as “*chiklaba kunjada tinnare Radha Shyam*” (In the silent bower, the Lord unites with the lady Radha. Both drink each other's nectar and have their wishes fulfilled). This is the *sambhog* as enacted in Nitya Raas. The two after immersing in Shrigara rasa change their clothes and they are offered betel nuts by other Gopis. This is the stage of *swadhin* (Khoni, 2016).

In *lai Haraoba*, the backbone of Manipuri dances, has a sequence called *panthoibi jagoi* (also discussed in first chapter). It describes the meeting of Nongpok Ningthou (God) and Panthoibi (Goddess) which is enacted in the form of dance. They talk, share fruits, flowers and enjoy their union. The song¹⁰ sung in Panthoibi jagoi can be roughly translated as placing at equal level and touching of their tip of fingers, shoulders, dancing face to face holding each other's waist, touching of their eye lashes and sharing their feelings. This is the form of union we see in Lai Haraoba. This festival as described in first chapter is re-enactment of creation of our universe through dance. When elders talk of dance in Manipur, they always use the phrase, *Leisemngeidagi saraklklaba jagoi* (dances since the time of creation). In the myth, the origin of Manipuri Jagoi is traced to the first dance of Goddess called *Nonthangleima*. With the orders from Guru Sidaba Asiba was trying to create land for habitation. But Haraba

¹⁰ *Sanam thokse mathokse
sanam hanse mahanse
pakhang shamei wainase
nura shamei chunase
chunare chunare
ho yaya hoye*

kept disturbing the process. Therefore guru Sidaba created Nongthangleima to distract Haraba. She danced seductively and the nupi jagoi (female dance) is derived from the dance performed by her. And from the dance of Haraba dancing to impress the enchantress originate the nupa jagoi (male dance). From the conception of Jagoi in Manipur, there is an inevitable participation of male and female. The basic hand steps used in Lai Haraoba and also the basic of Manipuri dance is called *Chumsa Jagoi* (also known as the dance of Gods and Goddesses) symbolises the two elements- pi and pa (yin and yang) which is crucial for creation of lifeforms. In chumsa Jagoi left hand and right hand signifies female and male respectively and they are moved facing one another. One cycle starts with left hand placed little above the right and ends with right hand slightly above the left. The right palm faces downwards while the left faces upwards. This is the basic principle of pi-pa which is the foundation of all lives. The etymology of Jagoi itself tells about the interaction of male and female. *Chuk-koi* means the act of *lainuras* (female deities) escaping from Lainingthou (gods) as a way of teasing them.

Thus we see how union is indicated in both the dance forms. Lai Haraoba entails dance of creation. Everyone is aware of this. It is hard to tell whether there was an effort to cover this fact. It was not hidden from the public that the gestures represented making of human bodies and union of male and female. It was presented more as a pre-requisite for procreation. It cannot be said how far Lai Haroaba's approved representation of union outside the realm of procreation. Unlike Raas there was not attempt to cover up the union and explained creation as devoid of any sexual union of bodies. All the dances were done in a euphemistic order though. Lai Haraoba is observed in sacred compounds and any kind of sexual behaviour is avoided. Nowadays there are criticisms of Maibis who dance in provocative manner (which includes smiles, swaying of hips, movement of shoulders, winks etc). In case of Raas, it is the rejection of anything to do with bodily union terming as something profane.

Sanitisation in Raas penetrated everyday lives of people where intimacy is kept hidden as if nothing as such happens. With the advent of Hinduism, restriction of bodies became more visible and new norms in the name of morality set in. The society as a whole today does not accept any sexual connotation in public space. It is tricky to comment on the acceptance of intimacy in private space (apart from married couple) because the cameras and eyes of moral guardians have legitimate access to most of the 'private spaces'.

3.4. Sanitisation through Costumes and Expressions

There could be many other ways in which Raas as a performance was made sacred and the sexual connotations were removed or ignored. Anything sexual is refrained. This work would like to highlight some aspects of this process of sanitisation through its costumes and bodily expressions. Even though the costumes of Raas were made with full consideration of earlier dress codes, an effort was also made side by side to pick up the ones which would prevent any form of sexual message. Four parts of the dress will be discussed here- *maikhum* (veil), *thabakyet* (a white cloth covering the chest), *poswan* (part of the dress which covers the hip) and the *potloi* (the lower garment which covers the ankle).

Observing veiling is a marker of morality and chastity. Another side of veiling and Purdah is to control sexuality of women. It is practiced or made to practice with the notion that women's body is a sexual body and thus it needs to be covered to avoid sexual connotations. The use of *maikhum* (veil) in Jagoi Raas is to prevent any sensual gesture which could evoke lust (Devi, 2010, p. 65). The dress with the veil is called *Koktumbi phijet* (koktumbi dress). The hair is tied in the bun on the top of the head and a black conical headdress covers the bun. The white net like cloth with golden borders is placed on top of *koktumbi* covering the face. The tying of top knot bun indicates someone who is devoted to God or who is engaged in an attempt of spiritual attainment. *Maikhum* (veil) is considered to be inspired by *maibis* (priestess) who perform under the drape of a white cloth in the rituals of *Lai Ikouba* (calling the spirits of Gods), *lai nupi thiba* (God's search for a companion) and *laimang phamba* (delivering oracle). In all these three parts of *lai haraoba*, *maibis* are in closer contact with the God. These priestesses are called the 'chosen ones' who are possessed by spirits of traditional deities. They denounce their normal family life and adopt the profession of a messenger of God who facilitates religious ceremonies. Once they show sign of possession, they go in search of Guru, their guardian in unconscious state and then she is taught songs, dance and ritual requirements to officiate rituals and service of deities. Some *Maibis* also maintain family life but on certain nights she is left alone by her husband in a separate room. It is believed that on these nights, she is visited by the God (Paratt, 1980). *Lai Ikouba* is the calling of Gods and it is performed at the start of *Lai Haroaba* festival where the spirits of Gods and Goddesses are called to rest in the sacred objects which would be their symbols throughout the festival. *Lai nupi thiba* is God's search for a companion. It is performed by a *maibi* with a stick (*sagol kangjei*) and a ball. Whoever the ball hits become the wives of the God and has to dedicate herself in the service of the god. Nowadays, this ritual is just enacted



Jackson Meisnam

Picture 8: Radha and Gopis in a stage performance of Basanta Raas. They are clad in *Koktumbi* dress. *Maikhum phi* (veil) is worn on top of the conical headdress covering the top bun. Tying of a top knot bun signifies someone engaged in devotion to God. The Lower cylindrical costume is called *potloi*. It took this rigid form in the post war times. Earlier it was more loose like a skirt. The white cloth worn on top of the blouse is called *thabakyet* (chest strap). And the curvy white cloth with shining border is *Poswan*. *Maikhumni* (Veil), *Thabakyet* (chest Strap), *Poswan* – cover the face, breast and hips- the sexualised body parts of a female.

and the ball is purposefully made to hit another Maibi. *Laimang Phamba* is the act of passing on oracles of what will bestow upon the land. The people will be told to perform certain rituals to ward off negative events. The maibis are possessed by the spirits of the God and they speak in archaic language. These three fragments of Lai Haraoba are the ones in which maibis are closest to the God as their messenger. Their faces are veiled in all these three instances but otherwise, their faces remain unveiled. *Maikhumbi* in Raas could have drawn from the similar meaning of veil as used by *maibi*. The gopis in Raas itself are embodiment of God himself and they are prayed by the audience. It could be a symbol of their attachment to Shree Krishna and they and their closeness to God in their enactment as gopis and Radha. Just as *Maibis* maintain distance from their human selves, the veil used by Gopis is also to avoid any form of desire or lust. Non-acceptance of any form of erotic representation is to mark out a sacred space which is divine and a profane space which is worldly and human.

From the discussion of *purdah* as acknowledging the sexual body of women, the use of *maikhumbi* connotes the same meaning. It is to undermine emotions of corporal being as a woman while approaching a male- Krishna. Male is the supreme and all the beings- male/ female who seek him are female conveyed through *gopi bhav* or *Radha Bhav*. This has come to affect the social life of women in general which can be seen in the practice of covering their head by married women in their presence of elders especially male.

Thabakyet is a white cloth tied around the chest on top of the velvet blouse worn by gopis. The breast is covered again with this. The same reason is given for the use of *thabakyet* as that of *maikhum*. It symbolises the de-sexualised body of gopis. There is a practice among Meitei women to cover the chest area with a cloth. This tradition is the basis for the use of the white *thbakyet* by Gopis and Radha (Bahadur, 2011). In some *lai haraoba*, girls participating in the festival used a white piece of cloth to cover their chest. Married women wear the lower garment *Phanek* covering their chest which is otherwise worn at the waist. It could have been borrowed from this tradition where girls of marriageable age or married women are expected to cover their chest area. Sexualisation of breast, then, seems to have started in Manipur long time back. In a documentary on Balinese life shot in 1946 shows women bare chest exposing their breast in market place or their daily life. The lower part of the body is covered. I have also seen my grandmothers or elderly women in Manipur exposing their breasts without any feeling of shame. It is that body of young women which is sexualised. *Nata-Sankirtana* was exclusively a male tradition and its performance is crucial to commence a Raas. So, all the temple Raas is preceded by *Nata-sankirtan* performance. Men wear white dhoti, white turban

but leave their chest bare. Neither a veil is used nor any kind of *thabakyet* to cover the chest. It is not clear which part of dress *Thabakyet* was borrowed from but the intent of using *thabakyet* to enhance the spiritual sentiments and discarding the lustful human body can be undoubtedly placed. It is only the female bodies which are curbed

Poswan is a white cloth with a rigid border decorated with brass and mirror works. It is worn above the *Potloi*. *Poswan* is considered to be taken from the white cloth with patterned borders that *maibis* wear on top of the *Phanek*. The lower garment is undoubtedly inspired by the ways of wearing two pieces of cloth as lower garment by *maibis*. The other perspective can be that of the imitation of yellow cloth wrapped above the *phanek* by married women in ritual processions or event mainly in *lai Haraoba*. The hip is covered again which is already covered with *phanek* just like an additional cloth is worn over blouse to cover the chest. L. Sharat Kumar, A Raas costume specialist tell in an interview that *poswan* signifies married women (*mou*). *Mou* is a word for married women and they should cover their hips. All the *gopis* are married women. In order to portray this, *poswan* is used deriving from the sarong used by *Maibi* who are also considered married to God. In Manipuri dance as a whole movement of hips is not allowed. It moves up and down supported by the thigh but not sideways. This is entirely different from what Laura Mulvey (1975) would argue in her theory of male gaze. It talks about the sexualisation of female body by focussing camera lenses on certain parts of women's body and thus making her a sexual object. In this case, it is the same process of sexualising certain portions of a female body not by laying eyes on these parts but by efforts to avoid it. It is in the very effort of avoiding the portions which is capable of arousing humanly desires that a woman's body is sexualised. The covering face, breast and hips to de-sexualise a body re-enforces its existence as a sexual body. It is somewhat similar to what Kakar would argue, it is the absences which tell us of an existence of certain things when he discussed Indian Sexuality through stories.

The story of *Potloi* is a little different. It is the long skirt worn at the waist and extends till ankle. The *phanek* is also worn in the same manner to cover the ankle. The earlier *potloi* were less rigid and resembles the *Gaghara* (a type of skirt). Over time, it went through changes and acquired the rigid cylindrical form that is worn today. The circular pattern in the border of *potloi* is taken from the same. In an interview, Laishram Sharat Kumar, a Raas costume specialist talks of three developmental stages of *potloi*- first as A-lined heavy skirt with embellishments, a *chebon* style and the present *potloi*. A body of *Potloi* is divided into three parts which represents the- dorsal, ventral and stomach of *Pakhangba* (a Meitei deity

worshipped in its form of a snake). The patterns embroidered on potloi represent the scales of the snake. In the lowermost part of potloi, there is a thin border made by stitching white cloth. This signifies heaven. Jagoi Raas, as it is considered as a play in heavenly Brindaban leaving behind the worldly sins and temptations, the white border of potloi signifies this transcendence of this-worldly life.

Not only of gopis, but the adornment of Krishna with a peacock feather has an underlying meaning. Translating the love with sexual implications upsets the Vaishnavites. Peacock feather, as one of the devotee explained is the symbol of celibacy. The myth has it that peacock is the only living being (apart from plants obviously) which reproduce asexually. It says that peacock reproduce through its tears.

As far as **expressions** are concerned, the eyes are kept fixed on the fingers and not allowed to look up. A still expression is maintained. The fixed position of eyes is also to meditate on the bhakti bhav. This expression is maintained in most of the Manipuri dances since all of them are devotional performances. But the new classical Manipuri solo dances created in 20th century include facial expression to convey meanings and stories. Raas generate an ambience in which not only the gopis, Krishna and Radha are engaged in devotion but the audience too are deeply immersed in the plays of their Lord. They are transported to the ecstatic world of Krishna and Radha. The total participation of audience and dancers in the same ecstatic world blurs the boundary between onlooker and the looked, performers and audience separated in the normal definition of performance. The audience do not clap in temple Raas but bow to it. It is not simple a dance but a manifestation of the divine through which people participates together in their quest of their beloved lord Shree Krishna through Bhakti.

3.5. Radha bhav: Construction of Feminine Bodies

There are only two poles in Bhakti- the Lord and the devotee. Krishna is the supreme and all the devotees-male or female are gopis. And among the Gopis, Radha is the one closest to God since her bhakti is considered to be the purest. So, when any Vaishnavite worship Krishna, he/ she is immersed in the Radha bhav or Gopi bhav as a seeker of the God. Songs sung in Raas expresses Bheigyacandra himself immersed in Radha Bhav and offers himself to the lotus feet. Radha bhav is inherently female in nature. It willingly submits herself to the supreme male. In Nitya Raas, the songs accompanying *pushpanjali* (offering of flowers) goes like “*Khurumjei bangshi paiba raasgi mapu oiriba*” (Oh the one who holds flute, master of the Raas, we gopis offer palm full of flowers at your feet). Submission of oneself to the

higher entity is considered supreme. At the end of Nitya Raas, when Krishna asks gopis to return to their respective homes, the gopis request him not to say so. They request him to keep them at his feet in every epoch of their birth. And thus, gopis express their submission of both their bodies and souls to Krishna. One can ask how Bhakti constructs a submissive female when it is followed by both male and female. The answer lies in gopi/ Radha being a female herself. The dedication, submission became a desired quality expected from the female population. Radha's spiritual devotion came to be expected behaviour of women. Krishna on the other hand began to be identified with the larger male population to whom the females are expected to submit. The institution of marriage which is also a form of union expects wives to remain submissive to their husband. This can be seen in term used for husband in Manipuri- Mapuroiba. *Mapu* is the word for owner, *mapu* is also used to describe Krishna as the 'owner of the universe', '*Jagat ki mapu*' *oiriba shree Krishna*. Mapuroiba will mean 'to be the owner' and in this case it is to become an owner of his wife who submits her soul and body to him. It is very popular lines in Manipuri songs where women often express her willingness to submit both her soul and body to the one she loves.

When Sija-Laiiobi performed the Raas for the first time in Manipur, she considered herself as the consort of Shree Krishna. She spent her life in the service of Govindaji. She becomes the Radhika herself for the Vaishnavites in Manipur. When the statue of Shreemati Radhika was carved, nails and hair from Sija Laiiobi was used. She is the one which have united with the God as suggested by her name Sija Lai-iobi (Princess who have become one with the God). She did not marry. She became centre of many rumours by groups opposing the Hindu religion. It is said that Bheigyachandra had incestuous relationship with her daughter Sija Laiiobi and impregnated her. It is to hide the bulged out tummy that a special dress Potloi (worn in Raas) was made. One of my senior, who worked on Raseswari Pala which is the first women's pala introduced with the initiative of Sija Laoibi, told me that these allegations could be because of her unmarried life. In a society where every woman is expected to have her *mapu* (owner), the '*mapu*- less' will be questioned focussing especially on her sexuality. A hindu woman always exists in every stage of her life in relation to men- father, husband and her son. The vaishnavites on the other hand, rejects the rumours and are deeply offended by them. The stories of Sija Laiiobi narrate her request for a separate room and her unwillingness to get married. As per her choice, she was given her room. The temple priests reported to the king that they often hear sounds of a male coming out of her room. The king enraged by this news went to check her room. They cried on seeing the headdress of Shree

Krishna in her room while she was deep in her meditation (Devi, 2010). The same story goes for Mira Bai. Sija Lajoibi's devotion is thus epitomised and the same is imposed on the wives who should possess deep devotion to her husband.

Since submission is the essence, the dance of gopis is a subdued eloquence. With eyes kept low, their soft body movements are classified as Lasya style in Natyashastra. It is definitively female form of dancing and it is very visible in other Manipuri dances. The women do not lift their leg above their ankle or little above the ankle. They do not jump but a serene, calm posture is maintained throughout the dance. Natyashastra classifies two types of dance styles- tandava which is more rigorous and lasya which is more subtle. This subtlety is identified with female. In Raas, Gopis dance in lasya style but Krishna jumps and runs around and dances in the Tandava style. Here is the origin of constructing feminine bodies in dance. In the literature describing the dance of Nongpok Ningthou and Panthoibi, it is written that Panthoibi dances in the exact same way as the Nongpok Ningthou. This hints at the undivided gender differences in a dance. But over the time, a gap was created and dances became a site where femininity and masculinity were constructed. In Khamba- Thoibi jagoi, the male and female starts off with similar dance steps with their bodies moving in a similar way and similar rhythm. As the dance progresses, males dance while jumping and the female still maintains the subdued steps. The hopping male demonstrates their masculinity by standing on one leg with their chest held in pride while the female bend down in front of them. Hopping of males in Khamba thoibi jagoi, Krishna in Raas and males counterparts in other dances have made their way in creating manly way of dancing whereas the feminine dance is centred on the serenity and subdued eloquence.

3.6. Being Female Being Feminine

Radha as the embodiment of femininity and bhakti sets certain rules for the rest of the female population. The restrictions on many aspects of social life could be considered to be influence of Hinduism which came with its own sets of normative behaviour. With the coming of Hinduism, the consumption of alcohol and meat were prohibited. Even after widespread of Hinduism, an open celebration by a queen was recorded in *Cheitharol Kumbaba*. She offers wine and meat to the deity in the market and drinks wine (Paratt). The constraints of food could have a slow process. It had bigger impact on women who are not supposed to indulge in all these activities. These are maintained even today. Paratt writes about the increasing number of cases of punishments for adultery recorded in *cheitharol Kumbaba*. The reason is

not explored much. It is not clear whether it means increasing number of people engaging in adultery or it signals to us the growing restrictions of women's sexuality influenced by the new faith.

Radha stands on the left of Krishna. This has been the designated spot for women since the moment of creation. It is from the left side of Guru Sidaba that women were created. This position is still maintained in marriage, majorly in dances where female counterparts always stands on the left. Even in musical concerts female singers prefer to stand on the left side of the male singers while performing together. During such stage performances, male singer moves around maintains a loose body language while female singers tend to stand in a fixed manner. It is a risk to indulge in slight movements of their bodies with the rhythm. There is always of fear of being judged as a bad girl/ woman who is very free with her body. This is slowly changing though.

In Raas or festivals like Lai Haraoba, the small, young, middle aged boys, girls, man, woman undergoes dance practice guided by trained dance teachers for prior to the festival. This is where we can locate the relationship between the dance and the society at large. The annual observance of festival, the dance practice is crucial since it serves an important way in which the culture and tradition of the society is passed down through generations. Meitei society whose culture is extensively defined by its dances mainly related to devotion, mythical stories and ways of life, it is important to carefully look at these dances which serve as pedagogy for the cultural traditions. As early as a kid learns to speak, it is very common among the society to teach the kid a hand gesture of the dance or two. The echoes of the word *Ta-din* is a stimulus for the kids to react with the dance steps. The first foot movements or lesson about dance would be the bend and graceful steps for the girls and a step involving jumping for the boys. From the very start, it is very common to hear the elders telling them- dance like a girl, be serene, soft to a girl and be manly, jump more, straighten your shoulder to a boy. Therefore, we see dance here constitutes a major tool for socialisation of children in their early age to their expected gender representations of self. Beautiful girls are often compared to Radha of Raas, Thoibi of khamba thoibi and it is more desired for the girls to wear Phanek (the traditional sarong) and maintain long hair which is considered enhancement of a woman's beauty. With these images, there is still a constant effort to feed the perfect idea of beauty, desired behaviour, mannerism of the girls and same goes for the boys. In a way, the body of a child is taught how to become a woman as Simone de Beauvoir (1973) would argue



Source: Internet

Picture 9: Gopis and Radha in Jhapa costume. In 1904, Nitya Raas was introduced by a princess Sanatombi. She was married to the then political agent in Manipur. Since she was considered impure to participate in temple Raas, she challenged the religious orthodoxies and took the initiative to start a new dance. The earlier Kuktumbi costume was changed and introduced this new style called Jhapa costume. The Chest strap and veil are removed. These changes in Raas have been seen in relation to women's claim to their own body and sexuality. The dance was introduced in the same year as the first Manipuri Women's rebellion against British.

that becoming a woman is habituated routinized process wherein it is the primary responsibility of the mothers, aunts, teachers and other women to train and initiate the girl into womanhood.

Same thing is in play here where the children are taught their expected gender behaviour through dance. Fixed eye position on the tips of fingers helps in avoiding unnecessary wandering of sights or eye contacts with members of other sex. The fixation of eye at certain point (in my opinion) is also a way of taming the girls not to look up to elders or men and to always keep the heads bowed down. It is taught to unquestioningly accept what is being fed to them. This is an interesting input to understand the ways in which boys and girls are differently socialised in the making of a male or a female body along with its desired feminine or masculine traits. Judith Butler (1970) views gender is performative. It is definitely performative as seen in the different socialisation through dance. One is taught the masculine steps and other the feminine one.

Being a female entails being a 'de-sexualised empowered mother' and an 'impure mother'. Since the creation of Meitei society, the sun (Korou) is the father and earth (mother) as the earth. These signifiers are used in the costume of Raas where radha wears green Potloi as the embodiment of the nature and earth. The word *leirang* is often used for girls and bees for boys. As a Meitei pandit explains, women are capable of bearing children just as flowers gives fruits. Bees as the mobile beings are supposed to visit and choose their desired stationary flowers to suck nectar. Leela Dube (2001) uses the metaphor of the seed and the field to explain the given role of women and mothers. Sherry Ortner (1972) too talks about the normalisation of women's role as nurturer. Being a mother or being capable of becoming a mother does not sound offensive in a society where mothers are given high respect. *Ima* (mother) in Manipur is not a fragile figure but it is the body that fight all kinds of evils. The bustling Ima market (women's market) is a symbol of empowered women of Manipur. The market has also been the driving force of major two women wars fought in the history of Manipur and these Ima(s) are still visible in all the political fights of against the state. The respectful term given to women Ima (mother) is also a de-sexualised body. Many of the nationalist imagination start with an imagination of a mother as seen in the case of Bharat Mata. A National mother figure is always given a high esteem and admiration but what happens to our private mothers is a private matter. Patriotic songs in Manipur refer to Manipur Ima (mother Manipur) in most of the cases.

Reckoning lines from the timeless song of a legendary singer Nongmaithem Pahari, “*Khomlang Laman*”, it is indeed difficult to identify the underlying cultural thoughts accounting to an inferior position of women, in a society that shaped the image of its women as an empowered Ima (mother). What one generally gets to hear, read, or experience (in some cases) is that Manipuri women occupy a better position economically, socially, culturally as compared to its counterparts in the rest of the country. Women in Meitei society can be situated between two extremes – the desexualized empowered Ima and the impure ‘Ima’. This binary make us rethink whether there exist what Sherry Ortner calls the ‘secondary status of women in Meitei society’. If yes, then what would be its manifestations? Menstrual taboo is one such manifestation and it involves the subtle play of power and dominance resulting to devaluation of women’s body. It is not a violent intrusion of human rights but an unconscious burden of cultural and traditional symbols. The major part of resistance, for this issue I believe, lies more in identifying that there is actually a domination (even though not complete and harsh) howsoever tiny and insignificant one considers it to be.

The bustling Ima market, the statue in the Nupi Lal Memorial complex - reminiscence of two historic battle fought by women, and the continuous everyday struggle of *Meira paibi* epitomize women power. They have respectfully earned the title ‘Ima’ which signifies the role played by Meitei women in safeguarding their sons and daughters from the claws of evil acts and activities. Whether it is the symbolic nude protest of July 15, 2004 or the theatrical representation of an agitated mother in Kanhailal’s ‘Draupadi’, each act culminates in the affirmation of the woman’s body as a site of domination as well as resistance. During the climax of ‘Draupadi’, the character Dopdi appears nude on stage having discarded all her clothes one by one – screaming her protest out to the men who raped her. Nileena Banerjee believes that for this defenceless rebel, at this point her body becomes her voice. Her nakedness is her power, her only weapon against the political or personal oppressors who have continuously, throughout her life, sought to subjugate and silence her. She fights male aggression with the very thing that is the object of oppression. A naked body accompanied by screams of pain and rage refused to evoke lust or desire or to assume forms that were publicly considered immoral. The same goes for the nude mothers in front of Kangla gate equipped with the slogan – ‘Rape us, Kill us’, which was conceived as desexualized body of Ima that could be seen disrobed as a sign of agitation and protest. It is the same desexualized body that can maintain midnight vigils in the street.

Haripriya (2012) argued that Ima Keithel has been a breeding ground for various political and social resistance movements. Images of women as Ima cater to the romanticized notion of empowered Manipuri women. Symbolic 'Ima' contributes to the archetypical image of mother nurturing and sustaining her offspring both through economic contribution to household and also through acts of agitation and resistance. This empowered body is what people of the land refer to, with utmost respect as 'Ima'. Ima, in this context symbolizes nurture, protection, and resistance. It is from this perspective, that one concludes that women in Meitei society occupy a higher status.

But why do people respectfully call them 'Ima'? What makes them 'Ima'? It itself becomes problematic in the land where her sons refuse to even touch his mother's garments and considers impure the thing which makes her a mother. The three determinants specifying cultural devaluation of women as Sherry Ortner points out include – cultural ideology that explicitly devalue women's roles, tasks, their products, etc., symbolic devices such as attribution of defilement, and social structural arrangements that exclude women from participation. There is a symbolic attribution of defilement in which a woman's body as a whole is defiled due to the 'demon of impurity' called menstruation, paradoxically the same natural process that makes her a 'mother'. The field (using Leela Dube's metaphor) plays the role of providing warmth and nourishment. A woman could only become a mother by providing her field to procreate. Although blessed with a body which saves the human race from extinction, the woman is simultaneously cursed as an impure body.

But how does terming a body 'impure' become domination? In fact, the patriarchal power play has restricted women's movement through dictating rules over her body. Traditionally, a Meitei wife is not supposed to touch her husband while eating, she is not allowed to touch her husband's bed during menstrual days, and the most common one being the prohibition of women from entering the kitchen and temples during her monthly periods. The very process that makes her a 'mother' also defines her body as polluted. Gloria Steinem's 'If men could menstruate' (1978) ridicules the whole notion of impurity explaining how the situation would be so different if men were the ones who could menstruate. It would become an enviable, boast-worthy masculine event. Menstrual taboo is any social taboo concerned with menstruation. It ranges from its perception as unclean or embarrassing to its tabooed mention both in public and private domain. Many traditional religions consider menstruation ritually unclean. Menstrual taboo is nearly universal. In Judaism, a menstruating women is not only

considered unclean but also touching her, or even an object she has sat or lain on, and having intercourse with her also makes a person ritually unclean. In certain tribes and communities, menstruating women are restricted from touching any sacred object. In a Meitei household, there are certain prohibitions during her monthly cycle. She is not allowed to cook, enter the kitchen, or offer prayers. She is not even allowed to take water from the common container for herself. Verbal restrictions are also imposed. Menstruation is not obviously a comfortable topic to talk about. Girls do not openly tell their guy friends about menstruation. Since the topic is kept covered, boys are not properly informed and they continue with the thought of it being tabooed. The word for menstruation in Meiteilon is 'mangba' meaning impure. The term itself sounds offending and it is no wonder that a natural process of motherhood is treated with such disgust. Because women gets period and are polluted by the monthly flow of unclean blood, their body is perceived as impure even though in times when they are not menstruating. This is the reason why men are not allowed to touch phanek (the woman's lower garment, sarong), women do not cook for rituals, big feasts and so on. This impure body cannot touch the husband's body while eating even though the food is cooked by her.

This defilement of women's body as impure has a deep connection with Jagoi Raas. The divine couple- Krishna and Radha is never played by a girl who has attained puberty. After menstruation, her body is not pure anymore and thus restrict her from becoming the divine manifestation. *Pung* (a musical instrument played by male, drum) used in Jagoi Raas is not allowed to be touched by women not women's garment Phanek. There are restrictions on women not to touch *pung* in general not only in Raas. Once I ask a *pung* player how they feel about letting women touch their *pung*. He told me that he does not want a woman to touch his *pung* because he maintains it as a sacred object, observes respect and devotion towards it and since women are considered impure, he does not feel comfortable to let women touch their sacred object. *Pung* is also used in Sankirtana and sankirtana is known as the mahayagya (the highest form of sacrifice where only men could perform. This is the reason why Sankirtana remained an exclusively male tradition. Another instrument called kartal (a kind of cymbal) which is considered sacred and untouchable by women. when Sija Laiiobi asked her father to set up a devotional singing group only for women, the king called meetings with his learned associates to discuss whether it will be appropriate to let women perform Sankirtana which is a form of highest sacrifice. The meeting came to a conclusion that since she has become a Radhika now, her wishes not really her wishes but wishes of Radhika herself. This led to creation of first women's pala and they were allowed to use Kartal. But till date, it is only

Raseswari Pala which can use Kartals. Other women's pala another feminised version of Kartal which is smaller in size called Mandila.

Conclusion

The continuum starts from raising Bhakti to the highest pedestal as the only way to love, to complete rejection of anything to do with erotic love like the ones we can see in Geet Govinda's text. There is an inherent process of sanitising not only the dance as divine but of the whole cultural and social life by compartmentalising 'erotic', 'sexual union' as obscene and capable of corrupting the moral ethos that the religion brings in. The means through which it sanitise the whole story of union, bodies of female dancers get manifested in constructing images of women's body in mundane life. Radha Bhav, which gives prominence to submission, is not only meant for the Gopis or the devotees but it becomes the norm imposed on women to make them internalise submission as a quality of being feminine. Being a female, being feminine thus becomes being submissive to the dictates which declares the same body as impure. The female population is indoctrinated by traditions and culturally determined beliefs which say that following such restrictions is characteristic of a good, cultured woman or a girl. Controlled by such false consciousness, one fails to come out of its shell at least to recognize these norms as biased and dominating. We are yet to witness a mass movement against various restrictions but there are undoubtedly buds of resistance growing among educated, informed, empowered youths of today.



Jackson Meisnam

Picture 10: After a stage Raas performance in Lebanon. Dancers are appreciated by Indian ambassador in Safadi Cultural Foundation, Tripoli, Beirut in 2015 after a Basanta Raas performance. Cultural troupes carry and present Raas at national as well as International platforms. Jagoi Raas represents Manipur, India and also the region of ‘North-East’. It is described as either a Manipuri dance from India or Indian dance from Manipur. In most of the cultural programs outside of the state, it is also often labelled as a dance from India’s North-East thereby homogenously creating the region with selective dances as its marker.

Chapter IV

Beyond the Spectacular: The Politics of Manipuri Raas Jagoi

4.1. Introduction

With the patronage of reigning Kings, Jagoi Raas occupied a position not only as a genre of performance but also as a spectacle of the state. The introduction of Raas was not a simple act of enhancing the aesthetics of Manipuri Vaishnavism. From its very moment of creation, Raas' connection with the state cannot be ruled out. Repeated invasions of Burmese troupes and rebellion in smaller kingdoms un-stabilised the early part of Maharaja Bheigyachandra's reign. Religion was an agency the king used to consolidate his power and stabilise the situation. Apart from the relationship between Raas and Bheigyachandra, the connection between this dance and State can be seen in the successive changes that have taken place over the years. From 18th century to the end of 19th century, Raas was a royal spectacle and represented the palatial state. With the coming of British rule, there are incidents in 20th century where Raas troupes representing the independent kingdom of Manipur were sent to welcome British crown prince. And after the merger of Manipur with Indian Union, Raas has become a cultural item representing India as well. Many dances troupes from Manipur are sent to various countries to mark the celebration of India's Republic Day or Independence Day. These changing representations and discontents over these representation signal to a politics around this dance which exist beyond its façade of a spectacular performance. Jagoi Raas, with its status as an Indian Classical dance form has claimed its importance as a marker of Manipur and often a cultural item that have successfully identified India internationally. Descriptions of Manipur thus remain incomplete without mentioning its deep cultural heritage of which Raas occupies a significant position. Thus, the adjective in the title 'Manipur' which establishes its relationship with the dance is to indicate how Raas has come to represent Manipur and thus marginalising other dance forms present in Manipur. In other words, the adjective Manipur is the site of contention where one is trying to unravel what 'being a Manipuri means'. Raas has become a site through which an identity of Manipur is created as well the site through which the same aspects of this identity is resisted and questioned. This involves efforts to disown the Raas terming it as something foreign which corrupted the indigenous tradition. This way, the dance has become a stubborn stain on the cultural history of Manipur which has its share in the political relation of the 'Manipuri self' and the 'Indian other'

4.2. Shree Govindaji as the King: Politics of a Dream

Introduction of Jagoi Raas in conjunction with construction of Shree Govindaji temple heralded a new Manipur. Manipur was known by many names such as Meckley, Kangleipak etc before but when and how did it become 'Manipur' is a widely contested topic. Not going into details of this discussion, it should suffice to say that the new Manipur Bheigyachandra aspired to build (or more or less built) was a more unified entity, suppressing or peacefully negotiating the rivalries between smaller kingdoms. Meitei, today which is a culturally dominant group in Manipur today was not a single entity but a conglomeration of seven principalities/ small kingdoms which had their own independent existence. The Ningthouja dynasty gradually subsumed other groups one by one under its fold and ultimately became what we know as Meitei today. Nongda Lairen Pakhangba (first King of Manipur in 33 AD) started the consolidation of the clans for the formation of Meitei ethnic group. Seven clans, some 16 tribes in the valley and more than thirty in the hills were incorporated into the satte by the end of 18th century (Arambam, 1991, p. 73). The last clan to come under the Meitei fold is Moirang. It is the chief of Moirang, Kheilei Nunngang Telheiba, who was also an uncle of Maharaja Bheigyachandra, who led the rebellion to dethrone the king since they wanted their separate and independent existence. Apart from this the king had to resolve its disturbed relationship with the neighbouring 'tribal' kingdoms in the hills. Another name of Bheigyachandra is *Chingthangkhomba* which means conqueror of the hills. Efforts of the Maharaja to resolve issues with Moirang and 'tribal' communities could have been beneficial in constructing what we see now as Manipur today- with geographical and cultural division of hill and valley (not implicating a homogenous hill and valley communities). **Raas and Govindaji temple which seemed to have heralded a new Manipur had their origin in a 'dream'.**

Due to Burmese invasion, Bheigyachandra had to flee Manipur and took shelter with the King Rajeshwar in present day Assam. The king and the queen were received with due affection and honour by the Ahom king. King Rajeshwar had earlier heard of the virtues and superhuman qualities of the Manipuri king. Khelei Nunngang Telheiba, chief of Moirang hatched a plan to cause misunderstanding between the two kings so that Ahom king withdraw his support to Bheigyachandra in defeating Burmese forces. Telheiba sent a messenger to the Rajeshwar that the person taking shelter in his kingdom is not the real king but an imposter. The message was carefully worded not to show any kind of disrespect to Manipuri king. The letter praised him to the maximum and encouraged the Ahom king to put his guest's extra-

ordinary qualities to test. The message was to indirectly inform the Ahom King that the real king of Manipur is dead and Ahom kingdom might fall into trouble if they did not take care of this imposter. After discussing with senior advisers, King Rajeshwar decided to test Bheigyachandra's might by giving him a task to tame a wild elephant without any arms or weapon. Bheigyachandra had always taken refuge in the worship of Shree Govindaji in his hard times. He remembered his lord and also the traditional deities which are guardians of Manipur. He recalled his land, the beautiful landscapes and people to whom he owes his service. He retired into a secluded room and went into deep meditation. Suddenly he was in trance. A voice (Shree Krishna) called out to him and told him not to worry about the ordeal as he will be there to help him. Bheigyachandra saw Krishna exactly in his Tribhanga form as described in Bhagvad Purana in his Raas leela dress. In return, Shree Krishna asked him to remember this face and form and install his image after he becomes the sole ruler of Manipur. He was asked to offer a Raas leela along with the installation. This supernatural encounter was so detailed that Bheigyachandra was told where to find the tree to make image of Krishna, the steps of Raas, the manner in which songs were to be composed and the dress to be worn.

In the dream, Shree Krishna told the king, "How is that a devotee like you should demonstrate weakness in such a situation? **You are my instrument.** You cannot die in vain." To this Bheigyachandra replied, "My Great Lord Govindaji, I am your humble and helpless devotee. My mind and body are eclipsed under the thick cloud of sins. I do not have the least qualification to be your servant and instrument. Yet how vast is your ocean of mercy! **You have chosen a weakling and pauper like me, to be your servant** (Singh, 2007). And thus the story continues- Bheigyachandra effortlessly tamed the wild elephant, regained his throne in Manipur and engaged himself in reconciliation and integration of Manipur. The king got busy in his political reconciliation was delayed the process of installation. He was reminded once again of his incomplete task by a Tangkhul woman who was captivated by the charms of a young boy whom she encountered in the hills. The description of the boy given by this Tangkhul woman was matched exactly to that of Shree Krishna. The king now reminded of his promise decided to perform his obligation. The image was made by a common person named Sapam Lokhon.

In a theatre play written by a professor of Manipur University, MC Arun called "Rajarshi Bhagyachandra", the writer provides a commentary on the contemporary issues by going back and forth with past and present. It hints to a need of another leader like Bheigyachandra

in Manipur who knows the politics well and has capacity to bring out solutions compatible to the context. Through the dialogues between an orthodox old man and a young radical educated woman, MC Arun provides his own perspective on the historical episodes of Maharaja Bheigyachandra. **The dream, as the woman character says, is a conscious dream dreamt while carefully imagining the kind of future one wants.** No one knows the reality of this dream but it is only Rajarshi who knows the truth. The image and dance conveyed through his dreams were deeply related to existing dance forms. In one of the scene, the character playing Sija Laoibi, daughter of the king, says “it is a moment of extreme happiness that I can render the stories of Shree Krishna and Radha with the dance steps of *leisem jagoi* and *leima jagoi* (these are earlier dances) that I learnt in my childhood” (Jiten, 2007). It once again tells us of the seamless merger of two cultures.

The king’s dream could have been a manifestation of his own life experiences, the images of Shree Krishna that he imagined himself through his readings of Bhagavad Purana, or something in his subconscious mind. This Freudian interpretation of Maharaja’s dream is a possibility because no one knows whether he really had the dream or not. In central Himalayas of North India, the victims or oppressed in their time of distress would go to Bhairav, a local deity associated with lower castes. They turn to bhairav in times of their distress and the oppressors must make amends and worship bhairav together to avoid suffering. Bhairav thus became a saviour and a god who would give the victims justice which the law cannot offer. Possession, oracles became a way to settle disputes and many other problems (Sax, 2008). It could have been either way, a dream manifesting images rooted in subconscious mind of a king in distress or a distressed being turning to his Lord for justice. Or it could have been a creation of a myth to construct allegiance to a saviour. Myth, after all is made ad hoc to fulfil a certain sociological function, to glorify a certain group, or to justify an anomalous status. It is neither a fictitious story nor an account of dead past but a statement of a live actuality (Malinowski, 1962).

Installation of Govindaji’s statue, offering of Raas were followed the dream with Bheigyachandra’s proclamation “Shree Govinda is the king, I am his messenger”. But the concept of God as the king was already in practice. Manipuri kings were referred to as the LaiNingthou (*lai-* God, *Ningthou-* king) starting from 17th century during the reign of King Khagemba. The tradition of following divine right theory of kingship was continued with slight modification. Bheigyachandra’s inclusion of Tangkhul character in his story could have been an effort to Hinduise the community. The performance of Raas on Mera waphukpa and

Wayungba could also be a means devised by the king to integrate communities residing in the hills within the Meitei Hindu fold. The festival of Mera Wayungba and Waphukpa were significant commemoration to celebrate and fasten the bonds between the two brothers who separated their ways- one who stayed in the hills and the other who came down to the valley. A bamboo pole is erected in the courtyard of Meitei houses with lantern fixed at the tip to symbolise the valley brother's remembrance of his brother in the hills. Celebration of this crucial day with Raas signified the new Hindu culture which the valley brother has embodied. And Raas became the symbol of this embodiment. After this episode, it became an activity of the Hindu converted meiteis to visit temples along with their household worship of traditional deities. The land was ruled in the name of Govindaji and victories were cheered in his name. A 'dream' which changed a historical discourse could only be a conscious dream dreamt with a vision of an aspired future. Like the character of a young radical woman in the play said, **"The dream is the politics itself"**.

4.3. Jagoi Raas: A Royal Spectacle of the State

Arambam Lokendra, a renowned Manipuri scholar described Manipur as a 'Ritual Theatre State' borrowing the term from Clifford Geertz. He argued in the context of coronation ceremony of Meitei kings with Kangla as their political and religious centre which facilitated that the exercise of authority between the centre and the periphery. Negara of nineteenth century Bali were a 'theatre state' governed by rituals, ceremonies and symbols rather than by force. It emphasised on a spectacle of the state. Jagoi Raas, materialised based on a dream is nothing but a spectacle of a 'theatre state' through which the king consolidated his power. Proclamation of Govinda as the King and elaborate preparations for Raas must have aroused excitement among devotees and people to witness an extraordinary craftsmanship of the king. Bheigyachandra's name is still considered synonymous with Raas. Mention of either of the two is incomplete without the other. Also, an interesting mix of a skilled warfare and religious devotion as a common description of Maharaja Bheigyachandra shows King's skilful juggling of politics, religion and culture, using them interdependently.

The installation of Govindaji's statue necessitated observance of daily rituals. Rituals were and groups of people were people were engaged to make sure every activity was performed successfully in the prescribed time. The political and religious centre Kangla was the King's palace and topographically, it incorporated adjoining stretches of land from the traditional

divisions called *panas*¹¹ of the state. The everyday ritual of Govindaji is called Shree Govinda's Astakal Seva. It involves aarti at different times of a day like dawn, morning, afternoon, evening, lunch, dinner etc. This offering of aarti was accompanied by a Brahman performing the ritual, his helpers, devotional singers, conch blowers and devotees who visits the temple at these times for darshan. Along with astakal seva, there are other events which are performed all throughout the year and Raas is one of them. For proper handling of these daily, monthly and yearly events, group of people called Loishangs were employed. And people from all the four *panas* attended to these Loishangs. The Laipham and Ahallup *panas* generally wear red-coloured Kokyet (turban) and officials belonging to Khabam and Ahallup wore yellow kokyet (Devi, 2010, p. 34). These officials still attend the Govinda Raas performance clad in their yellow and red turbans. There are Pala (devotional singers) loishang which took care of songs during every day ritual and temple celebrations. Pujari Loishang consisted of Brahman pujari who took care of preparation of food, offering of aarti and attending to Shringar (dressing and changing of Govinda's and radhika's costumes). The keirungba loishang played the role of overseeing day-to-day care of the deity, rituals, acted as accountant etc. The phiribi loishang took care of the dressed and were also responsible for making the Raas costume. The Moibung Loishang was given the responsibility to make arrangements during religious ceremonies. In daily ritual, sankirtan and Raas, there are specified time slots to blow the conch and all these ceremonies were considered incomplete without it. There are more Loishangs like Duhon loishang (getting water, preparing vegetables, making garlands etc), Kitna Loishang (prepare materials for aarti, ringing the gong, cleaning articles related to deities), kairgar loishang (comprised of craftsman and artists), Phurju loishang (making of baskets), Sambasa Loishang (facilitation of all the activities), the tanyeishang (in charge of telling time) etc. Another important Loishang was Brahma-sabha pandit Loishang which passed on decisions and rulings based on the strict dictums of the shashtras. All the Loishangs have elaborate duties assigned to them. The ones listed here is to just to give an overview. The temple was open to public who wish to come and pray. Arrangements were extravagant which stimulated awe for the God which was now the king.

Raas too, was organised with intricate details and established norms around it. The new mesmerising costumes, songs, the extravagantly decorated raas mandalis were nothing less than a spectacle. The first three Raas- Maharaas, Kunja Raas and Nitya Raas were performed

¹¹ There were four *panas* namely Laipham, Ahallup, Khabam and Naharup.

by princess, queens, the king himself and their relatives. It was opened to public for a divine experience of the dance. It became an exhibition of some sort which is open to public and yet maintaining a royal exclusivity. The public were allowed as spectators but participation was restricted. Raas, when opened to public, was a transfer of bodies and objects from the enclosed and private domains in which they had previously been displayed into a more progressively more open and public arenas where, through the representations to which they were subjected, they formed vehicles for inscribing and broadcasting the messages of power throughout the society. It is open to them as an invitation to be witnesses of the exhibition of royal power. It is through this that loyalty and admiration that submission to State was sought vis-à-vis Raas. It is a state apparatus, more specifically an “Ideological State Apparatus” which was used to transmit the values of the state founded on religious principles.

The fourth Raas- Nitya Raas in 1904 was the first one to be organised outside the boundaries of Govindaji temple. It was in the pavilion of the then Political Agent of Manipur, Lt. Colonel Maxwell who married a Manipuri Princess. Even though people have received this Raas as a sign of secularisation and resistance to monarchical structure (Khoni, 2016), one should also not forget that the main roles were still played by the Princesses and queens. It is not until the introduction of Diba Raas that public were actually allowed to become a part of Raas Performances.

The state revolved around religious ceremonies and Raas which were a functional means to restore order and keep in-check the political authority and supremacy of the king. Manipur’s state was indeed a *theatre state*- a state which was geared towards a spectacle. Just like Geertz (1980) described Balinese state as expressive, Bheigyanchandra’s kingship was also expressive characterised by its spectacular ceremonies, the public dramatization of ruler’s power. It put in much effort to reclaim the status of the rulers and to recreate the social hierarchies of royals, royal officials, Brahmins and the common public. It was a theatre state in which the king, queens, Prince and princesses were the impresarios, the priests the directors, and the public the supporting cast, stage crew and audience just like Geertz would describe the Balinese theatre state (Geertz, 1980). The extravagant ceremonies and conspicuous consumption were not means to a political end but they were ends in themselves. All these, the rituals were not supporting elements of state but the state itself. State had the power. It was the exemplary centre around which the lives of people revolved. The relevance of theatre state, I believe, is in the deep relationship between religion, culture which was shared both by the royals and the masses. The ceremonies and the closely tied relation of the

secular i.e. the king and the sacred i.e. the priests also show how the cultural productions in the form of rituals, public spectacles legitimised the power of both. The cultural system had varieties of symbols within it which tells how these symbols and culture helps to understand a phenomenon which is considered entirely political- state and its functioning. With Geertz idea of looking at culture as a text, looking at Raas as a mechanism and cultural spectacle of the theatre state hints to the larger picture of social processes and social structure.

The king, who have successfully established his divine kingship in people's hearts, gifted beautiful gift of Raas and Sankirtana- pillar of Manipuri Vaishanva Culture lives in the memories of the people who still pay tribute to him as a great leader and son of this land. At least in the cultural circle, the dancers still remembers him as the one who enhanced the cultural life of the land and leaving behind an extraordinary cultural heritage. A recent Manipuri classical solo dance performance called 'Rajarshi Bhagyachandra' composed by Sangeet Natak awardee N. Amusana Devi narrates the contributions of the king in the cultural domain of the land. I found this dance quite different from others as most of the classical dances are based on texts like Geeta Govinda. This dance was accompanied with songs sung in Manipuri praising the might of the king in a historical frame. It narrates his life as a messenger of the God, his dream and his creation of Raas and Sankirtana. In some dances too, a separate dance sequence called 'Bhagyachandra Prarthna' as an ode is performed as a prelude. Emphasised in all these stories is his taming of the wild elephant, his dreams, Govinda and Raas.

Apart from this the people see the myth and legend of this king in everyday lives in a statue placed right in the hearth of Imphal (capital of Manipur). A statue of Bheigyachandra taming was sculpted by Maisnam Betombi who took three years to complete it in 1959. It has become a landmark and a reminder to the people of its historical episode which heralded a new Manipur. The dream is not a simple an affair of unconscious state of mind but a conscious effort in building up the theatre state, its spectacle and leaving its legacy till toady.

4.4. Different Representations through Raas

Raas initially represented the palatial culture. At large it represented the Meiteis who have now come to embody the new culture carried and the Vaishnavism associated with it. Even though the public was not the main participants in the dance performance, they were nevertheless participants of this new cultural reality. Raas with its royal patronage have now come to represent the new Hindu Meitei population. It was the epitome of Vaishnava

devotion, a cultural marker, a root of mangba-sengba (pure-impure) binaries that were to affect the population. The sacredness that Vaishnavite population adopted in their daily lives were an extension of rules observed in the Govindaji. It was undoubtedly the royal spectacle but what it tried to profess- the norms of Hindu culture were successfully embedded in people's lives. Raas broke the shackles of its royal connection and became more accessible to the public. The Nitya Raas of 1904 became a landmark in the history of Raas since it was the first ever Raas to be performed outside the temple. Many new changes were included in it. The costumes which were devised to de-sexualise the bodies of gopis were given a total make over. The veils (*maikhum*) and chest straps (*thabakyet*) were removed. Arguments have been made that these change in costumes symbolised the changing social environment. It tried to present women as free and independent subjects. This Raas, performed in the pavilion of a political agent, participated by ladies of royal families still had its exclusive feudal character. The changes were also due to Santamobi's marriage to a Britisher now. She was stigmatised and was no longer allowed to participate in the temple Raas. In a part fiction novel based on the story of Princess Sanatombi written by MK Binodini narrates the subtle rivalries between the king's different lineages and how it manifested in the domain of Raas. After the defeat of Manipuri king in the hands of British, the independent kingdom came under the colonial rule and became a part of British Indian Empire as a princely state. The lineage was taken from Bheigyachandra's line of descent and a young Prince of King NarSingh descent was made the king. The rivalries continued between the two houses. This is also seen in the two women's pala of Manipuri- Raseswari Pala started by Bheigyahcandra and Jalakeli Pala started by King Nar Singh. Princess Sanatombi is described as a good dancer in the novel and have played the role of Makok chingbi. After her marriage and the decline of power of Bhagyahcandra's descent, she was not given preference for the role of Makok chingbi. The novel gives a nuanced description of she faced the sarcastic remarks during rehearsals of Jagoi Raas. With such remorse and also as a re-celebration of Raas that she enjoyed as a child, she initiated the idea of organising one. Since her body has been made impure with her relation to a foreigner, she was not allowed to offer dance in Govinda. This prompted her to organise a new dance in the pavilion of their residence. Proper codes of conduct were followed but none of the three Raas could be played since they were sacred offerings to Govinda. Thus, a new Raas came into a being. She was also not allowed to wear the same cotume as the Govinda Raas. This is the reason why she had to change the costume altogether. There could have been Sanatombi's own ideas to get rid of elements which



Source: Internet

Picture 11: Brochures of different cultural festivals. Appearance of Jagoi Raas pictures is not uncommon in the brochures of festivals which claim to celebrate culture. The dance represents Manipur through its performance.

restricted women's body but the reason of these changes were the orthodox dictum of the temple. This orthodoxy was challenged by Sanatombi in her own ways.

The fifth Raas- diba Raas has its own different story. It was started in 1940s with the initiative of common people. Permission was granted by the king. Since Diba Raas was performed during the day, it required lesser expenditure. Vaishnavites offered this Raas in their premises or their temples as an offering to the Shree Krishna. It was war time and Manipur too bear the brunt of the war. It was amidst this chaos that Raas (Diba Raas) became widespread among the public. Raas which was earlier a palatial culture became a common Vaishnavite population. Thus Raas, in pre-colonial period to the onset of colonial became a marker of Meitei Vaishnavite culture. The other 'tribal' communities remained out of this Hindu fold and retained their cultural world and Raas was obviously not a part of their cultural or religious identity.

After Manipur came under the British rule, all the powers were centralised with the British- the Political Agent in Manipur, The Superintendent of the State and The Regent to the Raja of Manipur. The geographical region- hill and valley of Manipur were operated through different administrative units. This also widened the gap between the communities resided in these different terrains. Communities which were earlier divided by thin cultural and religious boundary became distinct categories which were to solidify over the years. Prince of Wales, Albert Edward visited India in 1921. The then king, Maharaja Churachand sent a Raas troupe to welcome the Prince and give him a taste of Manipuri culture. The crown Prince saw the dance and was very pleased (Binodini, 2015, p. 104). This shows that the tradition of sending Raas troupes representing Manipur has started long time back. Binodini adds that since Maharaas, Basanta Raas and Kunja Raas were prohibited from performing outside the temple, the Raas performed in front of the Prince could have been Nitya Raas. The divisions of temple and non- temple Raas seems to exist till today but in other sense, the five Raas have become just a Raas- a cultural marker which identified Manipur. I am sure there might be still many people in Manipur who is not aware of the five types of Raas. My cousin also did not know what kind of dance they were seeing for the first time when they went to Govindaji to watch Basanta Raas. Only one item exists- Raas. The deep underlying features that differentiate the five forms have nullified for the public and audience. It is just Raas which have gained recognition as a classical dance representing Manipur. In this stage, Raas represented the kingdom of 'Manipur'. This representation of Manipur by a cultural item belonging to one group Meiteis speaks of the cultural dominance of the group which was

soon to become a cultural hegemony and thus marginalising all other communities in the popular imagination of Manipur.

India signed Merger Agreement with Indian Union on 21st September 1949 with transfer of administration of the state to the union on 15th October of the same year. After independence from British in 1947, Manipur had its first democratically elected government in 1948. In 1949, when Maharaja Bodharaja signed the Merger Agreement, the assembly was dissolved, the Chief Commissioner of India, Rawal Amar took over the administration. Manipur remained a Union Territory till it gained statehood in 1972. This is a historic moment in the political history of Manipur. The citizens of the state have been against the forceful merger/annexation of Manipur. It is an onset of another colonial rule of India and this led to formation of many underground rebel groups with the objective to fight for Manipur's independence from India. 15th October has been declared as a 'Black Day' in Manipur after it was announced by Co-ordination Committee- an umbrella organisation of seven underground rebel groups. Years of conflict and state violence in Manipur due to the draconian Act AFSPA introduced to curb the insurgency movements stirred more political unrest and hatred for India. It is in the aftermath of this historic moment that Raas has come to represent India at international Platforms. In an interview, a dance Guru Shree Iboton talks about how he went and performed Manipuri dance in Germany and audience showered claps. It received the Manipuri troupes as Indian troupes from Manipur. A daughter of Manipuri princess, Ibetombi became the first Manipuri women to go abroad (Australia) for dance trips. Now it is not only Raas but also other Manipuri dances which have come to represent India. Raas though retains its importance because there is a special liking of this dance by the outside audience. The credit can be rested either on its serene forms coupled with the mesmerising costumes which leaves the audience enthralled when they see it for the first time. It must be an interesting experience to see women dancing with rigid cylindrical skirts moving flawlessly as if the skirt is part of her own body.

In an independent India where a racial discrimination exists (rejected by many), there has also been a tendency to club the eight states of India namely Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura and Sikkim under an umbrella term called North-East. It is due to the Mongoloid racial features that the people of these states share. Their dance, songs, lifestyles, food, in short culture differs from the 'Indian mainstream' culture. Each state has its own story of integration with India and continuing movements of resistance against India. This incomplete political merger of the region has resulted in the

state sponsored cultural integration of the region. 'North-East' has become a category which was before a geographical entity. It has become a full-fledged cultural and political entity. It is very common to see many cultural programmes on familiarising the cultures of North-east through its songs and dances. Raas in this matter again occupies its position as a popular dance representing North- East too. These Programmes have been functional in assigning the people of this region as North-Eastern completely ignoring the diverse culture that is present in these geographical areas. This initiative has completely homogenised the region as one entity. Thus in most of the cultural programmes outside the state, Raas have also come to represent 'North-East'. The category of 'North-East' has become a cultural apparatus employed by the state and other non-state machineries to incorporate the region in the popular imagination of an 'India'.

4.5. Making of a Classical Dance

Rabindranath Tagore first saw Manipuri dance in Tripura in 1920s and was impressed by it. It led to the introduction of Manipuri dance in the curriculum of Vishwa Bharati, Tagore's centre of learning in Shantiniketan. This is one of the earliest exposures of Manipuri dance to the outside world. Many Manipuri Princesses got married to Kings of Tripura. The princesses used to offer Raas as a commemoration of the culture they were brought up in. So, the performance that Tagore saw in Tripura could have been Raas although it cannot be said with surety. In some accounts of Tagore's encounter and his inclusion of Manipuri dance, it is said that he is a great patron of this dance form who popularised it to the outside world. He is also regarded as the pioneer of Manipuri dance and culture (Thang, 2008). Another personality who was deeply impressed by Manipuri dance is the first Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru. Sanasam Gourahari Singh, Ex-officio secretary of JN Dance Academy writes in a report published in 1970:

“He (Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru) was deeply impressed by the splendour of Manipuri dance and the high philosophy behind it. He at once realised that Manipuri dance was worth preserving and spreading. The idea of establishing a college of Manipuri dance strongly worked in his mind and he started taking steps in order that there might not be any missing link in the stream. He rejected the proposal of some of his advisors connected with cultural affairs to locate it somewhere in Shillong or other places outside Manipur. To ensure the unfailing growth of the pristine purity of Manipuri dancing his argument was that its study should be conducted within its native environments, Manipur. As it was a new thing there was some

delays in the efforts for the starting of the institute. He warned officers and told them to avoid interminable delays. He was so anxious that pending the decision as to the perennial source of fund for the institute he placed at the disposal of Shri R.P. Bhargava, I.C.S, the then Chief Commissioner of Manipur twelve thousand rupees from his Prime Minister's Fund and directed that the Manipur Dance Institute should be established without any delay even in a hired house. A beginning had to be made somehow or other." These events and mark the introduction of Manipuri dance as subjects in institutional curriculum. Jawaharlal Nehru Dance Academy was established in 1954 and it is a constituent unit of Sangeet Natak Akademi, New Delhi. It is now a premier institute for teaching and learning of Manipuri dances.

The establishment of JN Dance Academy is also conjoined with the recognition of Raas (Manipuri Dance) as a Classical Dance of India. Raas has come to symbolise Manipuri dance. After the composition of first solo dance called 'Neelakamal Dalashyam' in 1939 by Guru Amubi Singh, the boundary of Manipuri classical dance broadened and encompasses all dances which follows basic taals used in Raas. JN Dance Academy has also been responsible for preserving the Raas dance in the form of staged performance. The staged performances are carefully crafted by Picking up crucial taals, sequences from the main Raas and presented in a shorter duration. This enabled popularisation of Raas among the public. Prior to this, dances were held only on prescribed auspicious days but now it is comparatively very accessible to people as a part of popular culture.

Recognition of Manipuri dance as an Indian Classical Dance by Sangeet Natak Akademi reinforces Manipur's relationship with India. It is a reminder of it being a part of a greater national union. The move for recognition could have a political one too. The strained political bond is somewhat mended with a formal appreciation of one's culture and an acceptance to provide a position in the larger National cultural milieu. This might have its own reasons too. One very evident reason is the Manipuri dance's connection to Hindu philosophy. It shared its cultural imagination with the Indian Shastric tradition. Other Indian classical dances follow the rules prescribed in Natyashastra, treatise of Indian performing arts. It classifies dance into three main types- **Natya** (depiction of mythological history and performance as a play), **Nritya** (to dance expressing the Rasa of devotion and having characteristic of complete surrender to the God) and **Nrita** (simply dancing with bodily movements). And according to the nature of movements dance were further classified as Tandava (vigorous expression of male) and Lasya (soft, gentle expression of female). Different emotional states known as

Rasas were also given. They include Shringara (love and desire), hasya (humorous), karun (pity and sorrow), rudra (anger), veer (bravery and courage) etc. Jagoi Raas with its essence of Bhakti Rasa and involvement of Natya, Nritya and Nrita, the tandava and lasya components contributed to its recognition as one of the Classical dance form.

Once a young Manipuri scholar asked a dance teacher from JN Dance Academy in a workshop on Manipuri dance “Does classification of our Raas as Classical have something to do with its connection with Hinduism?” The teacher did not respond very clearly as far as I can recall. At that I also did not quite get the question the scholar posed. The question has its relevance to me now and makes complete sense. Many historical narratives have tried to trace Indo- Aryan origin of meiteis. It goes to the extent of saying that Meiteis are descendants of Arjuna (a pandava). These are the group of people referred to as Gandharvas, Kiratas during the period of Mahabharata. The name Manipur was also traced to this period. I cannot and do not wish to comment on the factuality of these assertions. What is interesting here is that in dance too, it has a similar line of story. Meiteis have long established cultural and connection with the rest of the Hindu population of India. The Hindu influence in the dances of Manipur especially Raas enabled the cultural experts to see the traces of Natyashastra in Manipuri dances. It is a close resemblance and the structural congruence with Natyashastra that enabled Raas to attain a seat as an Indian Classical dance.

Its classical status also called for naming of hand gestures, feet position, body postures etc. Manipuri Jagoi had its own name but with its introduction to wider audience necessitate it to acquire shashtric names of expressions, hand gestures and so on. Since Manipuri dance was a curriculum in Vishwa Bharati, Bengalis developed a new theory of Manipuri dance. They renamed the postures and gestures in the name of mudras. The body postures which were earlier called which were earlier expressed using simple words were given new names. The use of feet is very important and in all the steps, feet are either placed together or one foot pressing near the other foot. It is again either the tip of the toes or heel that do the pressing. They were referred to as Khuning na thinba (pressing with heel), khongdon na thinba (pressing with tips of toes) etc. All these now became Sama, Anchita, Suchi, Agratalasanchara etc. It acquired a new form.

One of my seniors once told me about a young Manipuri dancer who was doing his PhD in Vishwa Bharati. When asked about how the classes of Manipuri dance in Vishva Bharati, he replied that even though they (Manipuris) perform better in Practicals, they always score

lesser in theory than the non-manipuri students. Bodies of Manipuri students were ingrained in the steps through experience but their own knowledge is proved incomplete and inferior with the imposition of theories which were alien to the dance form itself. Guru Rajkumar Singhajit, a renowned Manipuri dancer once shared his journey as a dancer. When he first started learning dance, the teacher did not teach the basics but asked him to follow whatever he was told. It is only after the classical status and need to institutionalise dance that basic steps were identified for proper training of knowledge. Manipuri Jagoi or Raas is in itself classical with its deep philosophical undercurrents and intricate details in the steps, costumes and many others. It need not trace back to Shashtra and engage in the game of name giving to gain validation as a classical dance.

JN Dance Academy, other different local dance groups are major custodian of Raas who is responsible for showcasing this unique cultural heritage far and wide. But as a temple festival, Shree Govindaji Temple Board which was constituted in 1972 takes care of temple administration and proper observance of daily and annual festivals. There is a list of religious festival that the Temple Board takes care of in the premise of Govindaji temple. Out of these mandatory events, the observance of three main Raas- Maharaas, Kunja Raas and Basanta Raas is compulsory. Those willing to participate in this offering can do so by paying fees to the Temple Board. Dance Gurus from JN Academy takes care of the teaching. It is difficult to comment on the frequency of Nitya Raas and Diba Raas performances. But overall, Raas has become a cultural property of the people and this rich tradition of Raas is reminded again and again with its compulsory inclusion of most of the cultural programmes.

4.6. Contestations on Embodied Culture: Revivalist's Perspective

Cultural Studies in 1950s started problematizing the concept of culture as shared commonalities and questioned culture as shared 'by whom', 'how' and 'under what circumstances' (Dirks et.al, 1994). Likewise, dance/performance as a medium of cultural expression, questions can be raised as to how, who and under what circumstances a particular dance was created. Beyond its artistic expressions, it represents a form of communication and manifest relations of power and representation. The 'cultural apparatus', as Mills (1939) argues, provides not only the way to see but also what to see and experience. Raas is a 'cultural apparatus' in itself. The creation of Raas was in itself a creation of new cultural apparatus where the subjects were informed about the new ways of experiencing and seeing a new aspect of sexuality which drew no boundary between 'devotion' and 'erotic'. This was

evident in the Bhakti tradition under the rubric of which the dance was created. It also introduced new religious belief systems and values and thereby creating a new cultural system through careful amalgamation of the old and the new. The other aspect is that the king was made to see as a divine figure and his powers were consolidated throughout the same cultural apparatus.

Combining the aspects of who is creating culture, for whom and the notions of cultural apparatus, the dance could be looked in two sites- one in its ritual space and the other out of that space (most commonly the stage). Zygmunt Bauman (1990) explains very simply what could be the main difference between nature and culture. As Bauman puts it, Nature is something which men cannot control (not disagreeing with the human scientific interventions) whereas culture as something men created and have control over. Culture keeps on changing according to the needs. But somehow culture takes form of nature where some makes the culture to be imposed upon some. So, it is only that 'few' who has the control over culture. Raas in that sense is that cultural apparatus created by those workmen who formed the 'state'. It is the 'ritual theatre' which demonstrated the state and king's divine power. In short, it was a medium through which the king wanted to consolidate his power. Turning back to pages of history of that time, Manipuri king was driven out of his homeland and there were frequent war with Burma and rebellion by one of the smaller kingdom who wanted to gain control over Manipur. It was the time when his powers were being tested. The conception of Raas Leela was instructed to him by Krishna in his dream. The myth still prevails. A divine connection or rather he being the messenger of god was implanted.

This was concerning the Raas in its ritual space. It is the story it unfolds in the other space which ignites debates regarding whether Raas Leela truly belongs to Manipur or not. The revivalist would claim that it is not a product of Manipuri culture but a foreign invasion and a blot in Manipuri cultural history. The dance has archived in a false history of Manipur. On the other hand, it has become very hard to disown Raas Leela because this is one of the few things that represent Manipuri Culture today both nationally and internationally. Sangeet Natak Akademy's recognition of this dance form as one of the Indian Classical dance has added to the debate. It draws a broad debate on what constitutes 'classical'. The status of Raas as a major Indian dance form somehow enhances the strained relationship between India and Manipur which was scarred by historical encounters. Thus, the dance and performance, especially when it is presented as a cultural symbol of Manipur, becomes a

contested site. The form used in the dance is derived from earlier dance forms but the content made it entirely alien to the land. The content, majorly the Hindu stories is conceived of as that of India. It has become like a 'penis in a body who wants all that comes under femininity'. The transgenders undergo medical surgery because they want to get rid of the penis which is a 'given' but not necessarily important to describe who they are. Jagoi Raas in a closely similar manner have come to exist as a 'given' (it is considered as a gift of the king to the land) that people want to cut off since it distorts the kind of self that they originally should have. The etymology of *Potloi*- dress worn in Raas and now a wedding costume for Hindu brides. The word *potloi* can be divided into *pot*- material things including bodies and *loi* (*loiba*) meaning the end. Cremation of a dead body is called *potloiba*- the end.

Both in temple Raas and Staged Raas, there is a big element of a Manipuri self- an 'Indian' 'Hindu'. This is the basic discontent of revivalist movements which started in 1940s from a district of Cachar in Assam. Manipuri scholars like Kh Bijoy gave a new perspective in the understanding of Revivalist movement. It traces its origin in the politics and power of the state rather than the religion itself. The 20th century state had less administrative power. The king and his upper class Brahmins used religion to impose various religious restrictions in the everyday life of people. They did this in the name of an administrative group of learned pandits called *Brahma Sabha* created in 18th century by Maharaja Bheigyachandra. It was against the religious orthodoxies of state that the movement began. This is closely associated with the basic discontent that revivalist with Jagoi Raas. The king and his gift thus remained a blot in the cultural history of Manipur which the groups fighting. It is an obvious reaction on behalf of the groups cheerleading revivalist movement to have contentions over the dance.

Conclusion

Raas remains an irreversible marker of a hinduised Manipur. It would be erroneous to assume it as a symbol of imposition which distorted the indigenous culture. It is very important to uncover the local elements that went into the making of this dance giving it a unique taste. In the post-colonial India, where there are claims of the continuing colonisation of Manipur by Indian state, Jagoi Raas' embeddedness in the question of identity and question of what represents 'us' and 'them' cannot be ruled out. State's recognition of the dance could have been an act of assigning an 'indian' identity or completing their incomplete political integration through cultural assimilation. If Jagoi Raas is a tool to assign an 'Indian-ness'

then, the same tool can be used to assert an identity marked with diversity with a tinge of indigenous flavour.



Daisy Salam

Picture 12: An ongoing rehearsal of Basanta Raas in Govindaji Temple Mandap. The old lady leading the dance is a dance teacher from JN Dance Academy who is hired to teach the dance. The Shree Shree Govindaji Temple Board established in 1972 takes responsibilities to organise the three temple Raas annually. Girls or women willing to participate can do so by paying fess to the board.

Chapter V

Conclusion: Towards a New Beginning

Beyond the artistic expressions, dance represents a form of communication and manifests relations of power and its representations. Jagoi Raas as the Manipuri version of Raas Leela has its unique flavour and local sensibilities which distinguish itself from the rest found in other parts of India. This dance originated in 18th century Manipur during the pinnacle of Vaishnavite influence and became a symbol of religious synthesis that marks the essence of Manipuri Vaishnavism. The creation of Jagoi Raas was neither an act of aesthetic enhancement nor a simple act of crafting a new dance form. It is a carefully carved out 'cultural apparatus' which facilitated a turn in the socio-religious life of people and its cultural history. From the very moment of its creation, Raas's embeddedness with the state and king as its patron cannot be ruled out. The king's dream, dreamt with a vision of a desired future is the source of Raas' inception. In 1940s, it escaped the boundary of orthodox temple and became embedded in people's cultural life. Its initial status as state's spectacle transformed into a marker of Hindu Meitei population and eventually of 'Manipur'. In contemporary times, it has also become a site where 'North-eastern' identity is assigned by including it as a compulsory item in various North-east cultural programs that claims to celebrate the region's cultural diversity. In the post-colonial India, Raas got recognised as one of India's classical dances and hence a marker of India and its cultural diversity. Making of a classical dance is also to reinforce a nationalist history through dance. How can one understand making of a local dance form as a classical and unravel the politics involved around its formation. Most importantly, it signals to the question of what happens after the recognition, the representations, contestations and a constant creation of a 'self' and the 'other'.

.Hinduism, as some scholars argued, is not a religion but a way of life. Hinduism as a 'way of life' enabled it to assimilate many regional essences into its orthodox fold. Hinduism as practiced in other parts of India has a restrictive hierarchical caste structure. But such features are not part of Manipuri Vasihanism even though it has its own version of untouchability between groups. Regardless of these features, Hinduism claimed its position in the socio-cultural life of the people. This could also be the openness of traditional practices among Meitei, rather than of Hinduism, which incorporated the new religion to suit its soil. It was not a passive act of receiving a new religion but a conscious choice of rejection and acceptance. Meiteis accepted only those which suits the people and their culture and rejected

many aspects of it. This led to mixing and matching of the two religious belief systems and a seamless merger of the two which led to the establishment of a synthetic culture in Manipur. The religion resulted out of the synthesis is what is referred to as 'new' culture in this work. This new outlook had a deep impact on people's everyday lives. Raas created in this historical juncture incorporated the values of both the systems and represented the 'synthesis'. This representation can be seen in the crafting of this dance form using the existing Meitei dance steps and its application to enact the new story of Krishna and Radha. This new culture could flourish in Manipur only because it got embodied in people's body and mind through participation in the dance both as performers and audience.

The new culture has its own ethos, values and norms which got highlighted in the dance. Sanitising crucial element of love and eroticism in the stories of Radha and Krishna as divine had a deep impact on the changing cultural ethos of the people. This could have been a conscious employment of values to define new cultural self and more civilised as opposed to the impious native culture. This came along with formalising new rules of morality. This was done through manufacture of females as gopis who were expected to submit themselves to the service for the lord which ultimately gets translated into their husband. The sexual features were curbed and tactics were employed to present a de-sexualised image of this dance. Sanitisation was done through a careful manipulation of aesthetics of the costumes. Veil, chest strap and a piece called *poswan* were used to symbolically cover the face, breasts and hips of the gopis. These are highly sexualised parts of a woman's body. By covering them, any form of sexual connotation are removed from the dance and hence signifying the curbing of women's bodies too. Because covering of face, hips, breasts became a norm in everyday dresses. This sanitisation had a direct impact on the outlook of Meitei women who started adopting these rules in their daily lives. Through the dance and its essence, submission is naturalised among women along with lesson of how to be feminine. Like many other societies, Manipuri society too reserved a high pedestal for its women as mothers. Women are typified as mothers and stigmatising them as impure due to menstruation at the same time. Their bodies are considered impure and their *phanek* (sarong) a bad omen. This can be also be seen in the non-allowance of girls to take the role of Krishna or Radha after their puberty. They are even restricted to touch *Pung* (drum).

Raas is not restricted to the temple space but since 20th century, it has been presented in more secular space of stage. The staged performances are crafted by shortening the length while maintaining the curical sequence of the dance. A different equation between state and dance

can be seen after the recognition of Raas as a classical dance form on India. The making of a classical is part of a nation making process that collides with the making of national histories. Moreover, in case of Manipur which have had a strained relationship with India after the forceful merger or annexation of an independent kingdom in the Indian Union, abstraction of a classical dance out of Jagoi Raas by tracing its form to Natyashastra has different meanings altogether. A history is thus carved on the body of this dance and a political contestation on this idea of 'self' that the dance represents is repeatedly questioned as opposed to the other.

The points highlighted above are the centre around which the whole work revolves. It is an attempt to understand the interconnections between culture, religion, dance, gender, politics using dance as a site. This discussion enables in drawing out a commentary on the contemporary issues of women's sexuality in Manipur, the politics of recognition, claims of mis-representations of identity, the revivalist movements etc.

Having said this, the work still lacks on certain grounds. It uses the work and theoretical references of dance studies which is concerned more with the modern dancing which emerged post war as a form of entertainment, cultural resistance or crafting of a new culture. The politics of these dances are either crafting or contesting notions of identity. One of the major points of modern dancing has been the agency of dancers and the active assertion of their agency through dancing. Describing the modern dance and choreography, expression of the dancer or performer is often invoked. The dancer expresses through dance her feelings, emotions, anxieties and the social issues that one faces. Dance as an individual expression is a powerful weapon of protest and resistance. When it comes to traditional dances like Raas which is born out of a collective life and also functions to bind a collective social life, the agency seems limited. It is a collective expression or an expression manufactured by the state. It depends. Very little can be said about how much freedom dancers and dance teachers have utilised to deviate from the traditional styles. More or less, the dance in staged performances too seems to stick to the traditional norms. But nowadays, one gets to see more usage of facial expressions, breaking the soft and subtler body movements to suit the audience.

Manipuri dance in general is often judged as being very slow. To cope with the audience who does not appreciate the 'slowness' dancers these days maintain a faster rhythm to break the slowness and monotony. The slowness and the monotony itself are the classifying features of a Jagoi. These dances are not very loud but carried out in a subtle form. The expressions are also still or expressionless. These are common descriptions often found in books or online

sources. But maintaining the expressionless face, or a still demeanour is an expression in itself. It is an expressionless expression. It has its cultural meanings. Now the question is how much people are willing to accept changes in their traditional forms to suit the highly globalising world. Another question is how much of traditional dances can be preserved and made aware to the coming generations at times when Manipur is rapidly engrossing in the growing culture industry.

The agency of dance is what I would like to explore in later works. One question that missed the attention of many is the place of transgender community in this dance. Transgenders (*Nupi Manbi*) of Manipur occupy a crucial role as designers, make-up artistes, dancer, performers, and artistes. Their participation in stage performances is common and their role as make-up artistes in temple dances too. But very little is known regarding their participation in temple Raas. Since it is danced only by female, these groups might be outside the scope of participation. A closer look into this could yield interesting insights.

I have included 12 photographs, each representing different facets of Jagoi Raas. With the pictorial representation and its brief description, an attempt has been made to condense the whole work through the stories these photographs intend to tell. Being a part of the same society and a Manipuri performer, it is hard to detach myself from the contents and discussion it arouses. I have seen temple raas only once. I have used the youtube videos to make sense of whole sequence of Manipuri Raas. It was very easy to get carried away with the nitty-gritties of dance that I wanted to know. That is the reason why my work has less attempts of connecting it to the larger theories and other forms of dance. Drawing comparison with other dance forms to theorise on the aspects of this dance is what the work lacks.

This study only did the work of joining dots between different sources and bringing out a coherent story of raas by underlying its relevance in today's world. These dances are very detailed which could be accounted only by a detailed study of its practices in both the temple and stage. No perspectives of the performers and custodians of this culture are involved. But their opinions on the dance and its significance could help in the further understanding of this dance and its role. The most important part, I feel, is the popularity of this dance among the common people. My cousin who went with me to Govindaji Temple to watch Raas performance did not know what the dance was called. This could be her innocence or a fault in the school curriculum which failed to provide a proper knowledge about a dance which exists as cultural symbol. The popularity obviously might have decreased but the fifty-sixty

gopis in the Basanta raas performance in 2018 and the huge crowd also tell us of a different story. This could only be unravelled by a closer engagement with the people and the dance. Having said all these, the question still remains – **whose embodied culture?**

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Performances in Festival of Raas on the occasion of 291th Birth Anniversary of Rajarshi Bhagyachandra held at Jawaharlal Nehru Academy, Imphal

Basanta Raas by Progressive Artistes Laboratory, 25th September 2017
https://youtu.be/eZjK7oYhb_g

Diba Raas by Lianda Folk and Classical Academy, 27th September 2017
<https://youtu.be/XIB5cc60CWo>

Kunja Raas by Sangeet Kala Sangam, 24th September 2017 https://youtu.be/1fbu_whsO2U

Maharaas by Manipur Jagoi marup, 23rd September 2017 <https://youtu.be/rIY8aeNhuFM>

Nitya Raas by Manipuri Nartanalaya, 26th September 2017 <https://youtu.be/6zLjhmXaoe0>