



Traditional Bishnupriya Manipuri Folk Songs in North-East India: History and Development



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Abstract

This research will explore the traditional Bishnupriya Manipuri folk songs in North-East India, with a particular focus on the significance of the flute. The Bishnupriya Manipuri community, an Indo-Aryan linguistic and ethnic group residing in the northeastern states of India, holding a rich cultural heritage characterized by its unique musical traditions. Among the various instruments used in their folk music, the flute holds a significant and special place due to its melodic versatility and cultural symbolism. The study delves into the historical context of Bishnupriya Manipuri folk music, tracing its roots and evolution through oral traditions. It will examine the role of the flute in their musical compositions, analyzing its contribution to the overall aesthetic and emotional depth of their songs. The research will also highlight how the flute is intricately linked to various cultural rituals, festivals, and daily life practices within this community's people. By conducting fieldwork, interviews with local musicians, and analyzing musical compositions, this research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the traditional Bishnupriya Manipuri folk songs and flute's significance in it. The findings underscore the flute's role not only as a musical instrument but also as a cultural emblem that encapsulates the identity, traditions, and collective memory of the Bishnupriya Manipuri community people. This study will contribute to the broader discourse on ethnomusicology and the preservation of intangible Indian cultural heritage in North-East India.

Keywords : Bishnupriya Manipuri, Traditional folk songs, North-East India, Cultural heritage, Musical tradition

Research Paper

Introduction

Music is connecting people in every sense. Folk tune creates a bridge between people in society, it helps establishing connections between generations and to others within community and society, bringing them together with a shared history and purpose. The folk songs of India are reflections of deep and diverse culture and an indispensable part of Indian rural lives. In North-east India, there is co-existence of several community people, different community's society, variety of their culture, art, music, traditions, religious rituals etc. including all that reflects the greatness of Indian unified society and its culture.

Among the different community people's folk songs in North-east India, I have chosen my research project

on Bishnupriya Manipuri community's folk songs particularly. Purpose of my research project is to bring out something new facts and informations about the heritage of glorious Indian society and its culture, and to explore the history and development of Bishnupriya Manipuri folk songs, focusing on their cultural significance, evolution, and contemporary relevance, making it imperative to study and preserve this aspect of their culture.

Research Problems

The Bishnupriya Manipuri community, like many indigenous groups, faces the threat of cultural erosion due to the forces of modernization, migration, and globalization. The younger generation is increasingly disconnected from their cultural roots, leading to a

decline in the transmission and practice of traditional folk songs. The flute, once a ubiquitous instrument in the community, is also becoming less common as Western musical instruments gain popularity. This research seeks to address the problem of cultural preservation by documenting and analyzing the traditional folk songs of the Bishnupriya Manipuri community.

Objective of the Study

The primary objective of this study is to explore the history and development of traditional Bishnupriya Manipuri folk songs. This includes documenting the different types of folk songs, understanding their thematic content, and analyzing the musical structure within these songs. Additionally, the study aims to assess the current state of these folk traditions and the challenges they face in the contemporary world.

Hypothesis

The study hypothesizes that the traditional Bishnupriya Manipuri folk songs, are at risk of decline due to the influences of modernization and globalization. It is also hypothesized that despite this decline, there remains a strong cultural significance and emotional attachment to these traditions within the community, which could serve as a foundation for their revival and preservation.

Relevance of The Study

This study is relevant for several reasons. Firstly, it contributes to the documentation and preservation of the cultural heritage of the Bishnupriya Manipuri community, which is under threat. Secondly, it provides insights into the role of traditional music in the cultural identity of indigenous communities, offering valuable lessons for cultural preservation efforts worldwide. Finally, this study highlights the importance of traditional instruments in their folk music and the need to preserve these instruments in the face of modernization.

Literature Review

A preliminary literature review found that past studies were primarily focused on understanding and simply knowing the various type of songs. Limited progress has been made on classifying various songs according to their characteristics in a comprehensive manner. What has been missed in the past studies was lack of a systematic method and absence of a proper structural approach in studying the things. In fact, I have seen that perhaps none has made any kind of academic research in past on the said topic and project. So that I have chosen

this project and hope this will help people to understand the tradition and culture that could improve social development.

Keeping this in mind, a review of existing literature have been conducted to gather background information on Traditional Bishnupriya Manipuri folk songs, which includes here are:

- Historical texts and folklore studies.
- Ethnomusicological research on the Bishnupriya Manipuri community.
- Previous studies on North-East Indian folk music.
- Analyses of the role of music in cultural identity and social cohesion.

Research Methodology

The research methodology employed in this study involves a combination of qualitative and ethnographic approaches, spanned from 1st July to 1st September 2024. Fieldworks has been conducted in regions with significant Bishnupriya Manipuri populations, including Manipur, Assam, Tripura, Meghalaya and other states of North-East India and some areas of Bangladesh also. Some relevant datas has been collected through interviews with elder community members, musicians, and cultural practitioners, as well as through participant observation during cultural events and festivals.

The study also involved the collection and analysis of audio and video recordings of traditional folk songs. Archival research are conducting to gather historical information on the development of these folk traditions. Colleted datas has been analyzed and identified the patterns, themes, and the role of the certain instruments which are significant in the music of the Bishnupriya Manipuri community people.

Historical Background

Origins of Bishnupriya Manipuri

The Bishnupriya Manipuris trace their origins to the Manipur Valley, where they coexisted with the Meiteis (Sinha 35). The Bishnupriya Manipuris are believed to be the descendants of the pre-Hindu inhabitants of Manipur, who migrated to the Cachar-Karimgaj-Hailakandi districts of Assam and parts of Tripura, Meghalaya etc. states in North-East India and some parts of Bangladesh also, during the 18th and 19th centuries due to political turmoil and conflicts. They are said to be comparatively nuinerous among the population of Cachar and Sylhet, where their special dialect is still

spoken in their homes, as well as Meithei and Bengali. (Sir G. A. Grierson 419.) “In 627 A.D. King Khagemba introduced the Meitai Language as court language in place of Bishnupriya or Kala-chaia language.”- The Background of Assamese culture by (Raj Mohan Nath 87). “Probably most controversial class of people having no homeland of their own, subsequently losing their identities are the Bishnupriya Manipuris” (Ghose 169)

Development of Folk Songs

The folk songs of the Bishnupriya Manipuris have their roots in ancient rituals and daily life. “These songs were traditionally passed down orally from generation to generation, preserving the group's history, beliefs, and customs.” (Kumkum Sinha) The lyrics of these songs often revolve around themes of nature, love, devotion, and community life. They serve as a repository of the community's collective memory, chronicling their struggles, joys, and spiritual beliefs. (Lakshmindra Sinha)

Thematic Analysis of Bishnupriya Manipuri Songs

Boron Dahanir Ela (Bishnupriya Manipuri Rain Invoking Songs, 1450 A.D.):

Boron Dahanir Ela (Rain Invoking Songs) is the most renowned ancient folk songs in Bishnupriya Manipuri, which has been handed down through oral tradition. These songs were composed at a time, when the story of the epic became very popular. These songs are addressed to Sorarel, the king of Gods. It is believed that these songs endowed with the power of calling-forth rain. Accordingly, in times of dearth, these songs were sung at night in chorus by males and females with a view to calling forth rain. These songs were composed in Medieval Bishnupriya Manipuri Language, 1450 A.D. (Boron Dahanir Ela)

Devotional Songs

In Devotional songs, mostly 'Raas Leela' are central themes to Bishnupriya Manipuri songs. These songs are deeply influenced by the Vaishnavite tradition, which gained prominence among the Bishnupriya Manipuris in the 18th century. 'Raas Leela' songs celebrate the divine love between Lord Krishna and Radha, reflecting the community's spiritual inclinations. These songs are typically performed during religious festivals and rituals, accompanied by traditional instruments such as

the 'pung' (a type of drum), dholak(a type of drum) and flute.

Another kind of devotional songs are 'Aarti', which are traditionally performed in each and every 'Mandav' till now everywhere in Bishnupriya Manipuri community people inhabited areas. These songs are also typically performed everyday evening (Senda aarti) and in the early morning (Mongol aarti), and also during religious festivals and rituals, accompanied by traditional instruments such as the 'dhol' (a type of big size round drum), dholak(a type of drum), mangkang (a kind of big size kartal), ghonti, and ofcourse with sankha dhwanis during aarti.

Songs of Nature and Daily Life

Another significant category of Bishnupriya Manipuri folk songs are those that depict nature (typical folk tuned songs and romantic songs) and everyday life based devotional songs (mon shikhar ela). These songs often describes not only the devotional soles character towards the parameshwara but also describes the beauty of the natural surroundings, the changing seasons, and the agricultural practices that are central to the community's livelihood. Through these songs, the Bishnupriya Manipuris express their deep connection with nature and their reliance on it for sustenance.

Love and Social Songs

Love songs and social songs form another important part of the Bishnupriya Manipuri folk music repertoire. These songs explores the themes of love, marriage, and social relationships. They provide insights into the community's social structure, gender roles, and the importance of family and kinship ties. These songs are being accompanied by traditional instruments such as the 'pung' (a type of drum), dholak(a type of drum), mandira and flute.

Evolution and Influence of Historical Events

Migrations and Cultural Interactions

The migration of the Bishnupriya Manipuris to Assam and Tripura led to significant changes in their folk music. The interaction with other communities in these regions resulted in the incorporation of new musical elements and instruments. The influence of Assamese and Bengali folk traditions is evident in some Bishnupriya Manipuri songs, reflecting the community's adaptability and openness to external cultural influences.



Results

The research reveals several key findings about the history and development of Bishnupriya Manipuri folk songs and the significance of certain instruments. The study explores the facts how the traditional folk songs are deeply rooted in these community's spiritual and social life, often performed during religious ceremonies, festivals, and social gatherings, how these songs cover a wide range of themes, including love, nature, historical events, and spiritual devotion.

However, the research also finds that the practice of traditional folk songs are in decline. Younger generations are less familiar with these traditions, and there is a growing preference for modern music and instruments. This decline is attributed to factors such as urbanization, migration, and the influence of mainstream media, which have led to a weakening of cultural ties and a loss of interest in traditional practices.

Preservation and Transformations in The Modern ERA

In recent years, efforts have been made to preserve Bishnupriya Manipuri folk songs in the face of modernization and cultural assimilation. Organizations and cultural activists have been working to document and promote these songs through recordings, performances, and educational programs. The younger generation of Bishnupriya Manipuris is also showing an interest in reviving and reinterpreting traditional folk songs, blending them with contemporary musical styles.

Thus, the outcomes here are–

- i. A comprehensive documentation of traditional Bishnupriya Manipuri folk songs.
- ii. An in-depth understanding of the role and significance of certain instruments in their traditional folk songs.
- iii. Insights into the cultural and historical context of their certain instruments.
- iv. Contribution to the preservation and promotion of Bishnupriya Manipuri musical heritage.

Discussions

The findings of this study raise important questions about the future of Bishnupriya Manipuri folk songs and the role of the significant instruments in the community's cultural identity. The decline in the practice of these

traditions is a cause for concern, as it represents a loss of cultural heritage and a weakening of the community's identity.

One of the key challenges in preserving these traditions is the lack of formal education and transmission mechanisms. Unlike classical music traditions, which are often taught in schools and institutions, Bishnupriya Manipuri folk songs are primarily passed down through oral tradition. This makes them vulnerable to loss as older generations pass away without having passed on their knowledge. The study also highlights the importance of the instruments in Bishnupriya Manipuri music. The instrument's unique sound and its role in the community's spiritual and social life make it an irreplaceable part of their cultural heritage. However, the declining use of the instruments suggests that without intervention, this tradition may be lost.

To address these challenges, the study suggests several strategies for preserving Bishnupriya Manipuri folk songs and the role of the flute. These include the documentation and recording of traditional songs and performances, the promotion of cultural education programs in schools, and the encouragement of younger generations to learn and practice these traditions. Additionally, efforts to revive interest in the flute, such as through workshops and performances, could help ensure that this instrument continues to be a vital part of the community's music.

Conclusion

Bishnupriya Manipuri folk songs are a vital aspect of the community's cultural identity, serving as a bridge between the past and the present. These songs not only preserve the historical and spiritual legacy of the Bishnupriya Manipuris but also provide a means of expression and connection the community. The history and development of these folk songs reflect the resilience and adaptability of the Bishnupriya Manipuri people, as they continue to cherish and evolve their musical heritage in the face of changing times.

This research highlights the importance of preserving traditional folk songs as a means of safeguarding cultural heritage. It also underscores the need for further studies to explore the rich musical traditions of the Bishnupriya Manipuris and other marginalized communities in Northeast India.

Footnotes

1. The term "Bishnupriya Manipuri" refers to an ethnic group that speaks the Bishnupriya language, a language of the Indo-Aryan family, and identifies with the broader Manipuri culture, which includes both Meitei and Bishnupriya Manipuri communities.
2. The decline in the practice of traditional folk songs and the use of the significant instruments are common issues among many indigenous communities, as globalization and modernization lead to the erosion of cultural practices.

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Photos & Videos

- a) Interview of Renowned Writer and Ex-Education Director Kumkum Sinha conducted by Ashu Kanti Sinha
- b) Interview of Renowned Writer Dils Lakshmindra Sinha (Part 1) and (Part 2)
Part 2: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1H7MOBY2VSZZ3kFdnEFfKu332Px-yClxn/view?usp=drivesdk>

