

Nat Sankirtan in Meitei Shraddha Ceremony



Soibam Monica Chanu

Research Scholar, Department of Theatre & Music,
Lovely Professional University, Punjab, India



Kumar Sargam

Supervisor: Assistant Professor, Department of Theatre & Music,
Lovely Professional University, Punjab, India

Abstract

Nat Sankirtan is a devotional form of music and style of singing performed in groups. It is very indispensable to the Manipuri Meiteis who profess Vaishnav religion. Nat Sankirtan was introduced by King Bheigyachandra (1763-1798) during his reign. Rituals from birth to death are practiced in almost all human cultures. Among the Meiteis of Manipur, death rituals are one of the most important practices. The death rituals of the Meitei accompany song and music performed by artists with various traditional instruments and cymbals like Jhal, Kartal, Mang-gang, etc. The said practice is known as Nat Sankirtan which is filled with prayers for the departed soul and well being of living near and dear ones of the departed soul. The ritual of Shraddha is the main death ritual of Meitei Vaishnavites. The Shraddha ceremony is associated with Nat Sankirtan which gives a completeness and essence to the ritual. Nat Sankirtan has gained global recognition today as the philosophy and beauty of its composition came to be known in other parts of the globe. It has acquired a place in the syllabus of Universities. Nat Sankirtan has been given due recognition by UNESCO. In short, Nat Sankirtan plays a great role in introducing the Manipuri culture to the outside world. Meiteis are the indigenous people of Manipur. Their settlement records back to prehistory. During the reign of Nongda Lairon Pakhangba in 33 A.D., the 7 clans of the Meitei was formed as 1) Mangang, 2) Luwang, 3) Khuman, 4) Angom, 5) Moirang, 6) Khaba Nganba and 7) Sarang Leisangthem. The seven clans vastly settled in the valley area. Manipur at that time was known as Meiteileipak. The research attempts to trace the practice of death ritual practiced by the Meiteis since ancient time, the changes it has undergone during the course of history and its implications to the human society as a whole.

Keywords: Meitei, Ritual, Shraddha Ceremony, Nat Sankirtan, Culture

Research Paper

Introduction

Nat Sankirtan is a devotional musical event performed by groups with traditional instruments. It is categorized into two, 1) Ariba Pala (Bangladesh / Bamon) and 2) Anouba Pala / Sana Pala.

Nat Sankirtan is practiced in the form of musical interactive dialogue with traditional instruments. It is based on the story of Lord Krishna. The meaning of 'Nat' in Nat Sankirtan can be traced as: Shri Leimapokpa Lakpati in his book "Meitei Nat Sankirtan Neina" described: "Nat Sankirtan gi Nat haibashigi arthra karino? Manipur Nat Sankirtan da esheisakpasingna chumnata eshei sakpada nattana esehi sakliba masana cholom su toubu, makhutta kartal paiduna khangliba, punglon gi tal da nettuna phijet lakchetki, hakchangi

mapal amasung nungi phongdoklakpa mak-ongdagi Ras thokhanlakliba mahak adu Nat kouwe" (Lakpati 29). The meaning of 'Nat' according to the author can be described as the essence which springs or arises out of the holistic performance by an artist in which he not only sings but performs the steps, plays the instruments and also adheres to strict dress code and physique during the performance of Nat Sankirtan. The word 'Sankirtan' can be described as a group of prayers. Succinctly, Nat Sankirtan can be defined as a prayer performed in groups with music and instrument.

Nat Sankirtan originated in Manipur after the advent of Hinduism. It is considered the soul of those who profess the Vaishnava religion. Nat Sankirtan came into being during the reign of King Rajashri Maharaj Bheigyachandra (1763-1798). (Thoiba 476)

Nat Sankirtan is filled with great devotion and rich internal philosophies. Scholars are of the opinion that Nat Sankirtan are offered for the salvation of living beings in the age of Kali (Kali-Yug). It is also termed as 'Maha Jagya'. Nat Sankirtan is a very unique practice which is embodied with the rich culture, tradition, music and dance dedicated to holy devotion.

Meiteis are the indigenous people of Manipur. Their settlement records back to prehistory. During the reign of Nongda Lairen Pakhangba in 33 A.D., the 7 clans of the Meitei was formed as 1) Mangang, 2) Luwang, 3) Khuman, 4) Angom, 5) Moirang, 6) Khaba Nganba and 7) Sarang Leisangthem. The seven clans vastly settled in the valley area. Manipur at that time was known as Meiteileipak.

Among the meiteis, those who follow the Hindu religion they are performing their rituals with Nat Sankirtan.

The Meitei Hindus, in their rituals from birth to death like Angang Maru Kokpa / Nahut Nareng (Birth Rituals), Luhongba (Marriage Ritual) and Death rituals like Asthi and Shradha performed Nat Sankirtan. Meitei Hindus compulsorily conduct the ceremony of Shraddha with Nat Sankirtan.

Shraddha

According to the belief of Manipuri Hindus, the spirit (Atama) left the body after death and merged to the Param Aatama (Supreme God). The ceremony of Shraddha is conducted with Nat Sankirtan, offerings, prayers and strict rituals so that the departed soul could attain salvation. The said ceremony is a dual approach as the said rituals are also concerned with the prayers for the well being of the living family members of the departed soul. The immediate ceremony after the death is Potloiba (Funeral Ceremony) followed by Asthi, which is the fifth day ceremony after the death. It is followed by the main ceremony which is Shraddha.

Shraddha is the major ceremony in the death ritual. The ceremony is conducted on the 12th/13th day post the day of the death. The said practice pertains to the Meiteis who profess Hindu sect. Shraddha is the most important and major ceremony among the death rituals which follow the day of death of a person. It is considered that once the Shraddha ceremony is held, it marks the end of daily rituals post the death of the person.

Shraddha through Nat Sankirtan

After death, rituals are performed for the peaceful salvation of the departed soul. The rituals are also meant for the well being and prosperity of the living family

members. The said practice started in ancient times. During the reign of King Garibniwaz (1707-1748), the practice of Sankirtan in death rituals like Asthi and Shradha is believed to have started (Chiteswar 21).



Fig: Nat Sankirtan in Meitei Shraddha

It is only during the reign of King Bheigyachandra (1763-1798) that Nat Sankirtan attained a concrete form. It is the age-old culture of the Meiteis to perform rites and rituals associated with music, song, etc. Nat Sankirtan is practiced by the Meitei Hindus in their rituals

The settings of the hall / booth for the performance of Nat Sankirtan also have strict rules. The performers with devotion and discipline took permission from the host, priests, guests and sacred shrine at the midst of the hall before starting Nat Sankirtan. Arangfam (program manager) offers / presents Kwa Tanga, Lei Chandan and cloths to the performers to start Nat Sankirtan.

The performance of Nat Sankirtan starts with 'Pung gi Raga' and followed by 'Eshei gi Raga' (Vocal Raga). The duration of Shraddha Ceremony from Bhed Katpa (starting part) to Joi Bhai (closing part of last stage) is around 3 to 5 hours. Nat Sankirtan is performed during the said duration. The composition of the performers of Nat Sankirtan are: 1. Esheihanba (main leading singer) 2. khonpangpangba (Assistant 1) 3. Duhar/Esheikhumba (2nd leading vocalist) 4. Khonpangba (assistant 2) 5. Pung yeiba (One who plays Pung instrument) two in number and 6. Moibungkhongba (Conch player). These performers play their respective big roles during Nat Sankirtan.

Main Performers in Shradha Ceremony

1. Esheihanba (main Vocalist)
2. Duhar (2nd leading vocalist)
3. 2 assistant vocalist of Esheihanba and duhar
4. Khomei (attendance of esheihanba and duhar)
5. Pungyeiba (mridanga player)
6. Moibungkhongba (Conch Player)

7. Mandap Mapu (decision maker of the sankirtan)
8. Beita (Spirit Guider)
9. Brahman
10. Arangpham (program manager)

is included in the category of Sushir Vhadya (Wind instrument/aerophone) among Indian classical instruments.

Sequence of Nat Sankirtan

1. Raga Houba
2. Raga taba
3. Men/Mel (Rajmel)
4. Tanchap
5. Menkup
6. Swadhin and
7. Vijay etc



Musical Instruments used in Shradha:

Meitei Pung

Meitei Pung is a traditional musical instrument of Manipur. It is a percussion instrument (Awanadha Vadya) recognized as a classical instrument among the 4 categories of classical instruments.



Kartal

This instrument is played by the vocalists by holding in their hands and giving rhythm to the song. It is included in the category of Ghan Vadhya (edeophone) among the Indian Classical instruments.



Moibung (Conch)

This instrument is played by blow through lips. It is manufactured from sea conches. The instrument

Costumes of Nat Sankirtan

The dress code of the Nat Sankirtan performers is very unique and elegant. It is quite distinct from those worn in other parts of the globe. They use white color dress and no shirt is worn. The varieties of the dress are;

1. Mapan chandba feijom angouba (Borderless White dhoti)
2. Khwangyet fi angouba machu (Waist Belt White in colour)
3. Tulshi Urik Pareng mathang ahumlak onba (A garland / sacred thread made of Tulsi branch)
4. Angouba langi Nagun/Lukun mcha ahum samba (Sacred thread white in colour)
5. Kokyet (A type of Turban white in colour) etc.

A few lines of song performed in Shraddha ceremony is highlighted below:

Lyrics

*“Hari Kaoganu Pukning
Langtaknara Kanroi
Hari Hari Haina Tattana Sonjaba,
Langani Soidana Taibang Epak Amamba
Hari bu Nattana Lanbinaba Leiroi
Jibagi Marup ti Hari Matani,
Epa Ema Sagei Sagei Aremba Ngaktani,
Aroiba Matamdadi Hundoklamba Soiroi
Echa Eshu Nungshiba Wakhalda Lupkani,
Ngaibide Matamdi Nongma Nongma Houkhini,
Lambidi Khanghoude Chattabadi yaroi
Numit Thana Nganba Ngamdraba Lambini
Eigi Karmatana Lamjingba Matamni
Hari Mabunungshijaruba Jibadi
Matamdugi Marup Oigani Soiroi
Mioiba Eikhoina Oijaba Khangdana,*

*Manghanle Mapokse Hari Nam Sondana
Lallonba Lakpa Nangdi
Sellep Sendonglaroi*

*Hari Nam Nattana Changjapham Leiroi
Kali Jibagi Lanbinaba Leiroi
Tanglaba Mapokni Mahei Yanhanlu
Mamlaba Taibangni Hanthana Khallu
Sollu Sollu Tattana Sollu
Matam Kaya Lelle Angang Oina,
Oijaba Khangdana Sannaduna
Jouban Oirakle Kanabu Kirude
Eigi Haiba Wakhaldal Luple,
Ahal Oirakle Sagei Chaorakle
Echa Eshu Nungshibagi Thourina Pulle,
Punshi Loirakle Aroiba Matam Lakle
Loina Hundoklamle Mongphamda Hiple
Kari Oina Pokpa Kanasu Khangde
Karmana Lamjingle Pokpadi Soidre
Hangjou Thijou Lambi Hallakpa Naidaba
Magi Charan Nakta Lengdana Leijaba” (Gulapi 48).*

Summary

This devotional song urges us to remember Lord Krishna all the time. The life we have in this world is temporary and filled with worldly illusions. We will leave them at the end including family, near - dear ones, belongings, wealth, etc. After departing this world, it is certain for us to go to the Lord's place in Beikuntha. He is the only and ultimate friend of the living beings. Therefore one must remember Him and realize that all the worldly things are not permanent. One's life is filled with illusions and ignorance. The precious life is wasted by forgetting our ultimate goal. The various stages of childhood, youth and old age are spent with ignorance, selfish desires and bondage with the near and dear ones. But at last, one shall leave them all to return to the place of Shri Hari (Supreme God). It is during our lifetime that we shall seek and devote to the supreme god, who is the only guide after departing this material world.

Objective

1. To bring out the philosophy that Meitei Hindus after their death attain salvation through Nat Sankirtan.
2. To preserve and promote the rich Manipuri Culture and to create awareness of philosophies of Nat Sankirtan.

Methodology

The Researcher used the Qualitative Method to bring about this research work. Both primary and secondary data are collected during research. The researcher also conducted field visits and collected audio-visual clippings on the spots of ritual ceremonies. Interviews are held with the participants in the ritual ceremony and priests, Brahmins, Sankirtan performers, etc. information are collected from Books, Journal and Relevant Audio-visuals.

Findings

Nat sankirtan is not an ordinary form of music performance. It is embodied with its own story line of Lord Krishna which is mostly based on the Bhagawat Geeta and Bhagawat Puran, dance steps and musical instruments like Meitei Pung, Kartal and Moibung etc. It has its own strict code of conduct and dressings norms. Nat Sankirtan has gained global recognition today as the philosophy and beauty of its composition came to be known in other parts of the globe. It has acquired a place in the syllabus of Universities. Nat Sankirtan has been given due recognition by UNESCO in 2013 (Thoiba 479).

Conclusion

Various rituals are performed categorically from birth till death of a person. The Shraddha is the main ceremony of the death rituals practiced by the Meiteis. It is an indispensable ceremony of the Meitei society. The Meitei Hindus worshippers practiced Nat Sankirtan in the Shraddha of their death ritual. It is believed that offering of Nat Sankirtan with sincerity and devotion can lead to salvation for the departed soul. The practice is also meant for the well being both in terms of physical and inner values of the living family, near and dear ones of the departed soul. In this way it is a very important practice in Meitei society.

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