

## The Sacred Ensemble: Key Players in the Rās Līla of Shri Govindaji Temple



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### Abstract

*This study aims to explore the various roles of Brahmin, Rāsdhari, Sutradhari, Arāngpham, and women in the sacred Manipuri Rās tradition. These revered individuals play a vital role in coordinating and executing the intricate rituals and ceremonies associated with the three Rās forms at Shri Govindaji temple. Brahmin meticulously oversee the procedure, infusing it with sanctity and spiritual significance as guardians of sacred ceremonies. Rāsdhari manage choreography and musical elements, while Sutradhari, who are singers captivate audiences with emotive music and narratives. The Arāngpham, similar to arrangers, manage the essential items and on-time execution. In Manipuri tradition, women are revered for their bravery and dedication, exemplifying the essence of femininity by participating entirely in the sacred dance as Gopis. The paper will go into detail on the profound cultural significance of each function, emphasising their roles in tradition, spirituality, and community cohesion. The paper will also underscore the importance of acknowledging these roles, as they are crucial components of Meitei Vaishnavite identity and tradition.*

**Keywords :** Brahmin, Rāsdhari, Sutradhari, Arāngpham, Women

### Research Paper

#### Introduction

Manipuri Rās Līla, locally known as Jagoi Rās a divine performance of the love play of Krishna and Radha along with the braja Gopis, is one of the major dance traditions of the country and is a living tradition. It was created by Rajarshi Bhagyachandra in the 18th century. During his reign, he created three Rās forms, namely, Maha Rās, Kunja Rās and Basanta Rās. They are performed on a specific season on a full moon according to the Manipuri lunar calendar and are performed only at Shri Govindaji Temple with very strict and conventional norms. The later monarch produced two more Rās forms in the early 20th century. They are Nitya Rās and Diva Rās, Nitya Rās and Diva Rās are not seasonal. Nitya Rās can be performed every day, whereas Diva Rās as can be performed during the daytime.

The three Rās forms namely, Maha Rās, Kunja and Basanta Rās have an indispensable connection with Govindaji temples, where the community actively engages and reveres them, infusing the sacred space with a rich tapestry of emotions and spirituality. The stage adaptations that are frequently seen on the contemporary proscenium stage are small fragments that are made secular for public amusement. Despite its prominence as a major dance tradition showcased on numerous stages, the glaring absence of substantial academic research and documentation surrounding the three Rās forms of Govindaji temple is lacking. Among these gaps are the crucial roles played by various significant personalities in the preservation and smooth functioning of this divine performance, like the Rāsdhari (teacher of Rās), Sutradhari (singer), the Brahmins who are in charge of the unavoidable rituals, the instrumentalists,

the Arāᅅgpham (the arranger), the women participants and also the Manipuri Vaishnavites who partake in this tradition. A scholarly study of their collective roles is still not on site. This lack in scholarly exploration impedes our ability to fully comprehend, preserve, and promote an art form that not only holds immense aesthetic value but is also deeply rooted in cultural significance.

### **Objectives of the study**

1. To explore the role of the Brahmin in the Rās Līla of Shri Govindaji Temple.
2. To delve into the role of the Rāsdhari and Sutradhari.
3. To explore the role of Arāᅅgpham.
4. To explore the role of women.

### **Hypothesis**

The successful organization of the Rās Līla at Govindaji Temple depends on the intervention, cooperation and proficiency of diverse persons, such as Brahmin, Rāsdhari, Sutradhari, Arāᅅgpham, and women. This study enhance the awareness of the value of conserving this sacred tradition for future generations.

### **Relevance of the Study**

Examining the Rās Līla at Shri Govindaji Temple offers important insight on the cultural legacy and spiritual importance of Manipuri Vaishnavite traditions. This paper explores the complex organizational characteristics and deep spiritual enrichment stored in this sacred performance by analyzing the roles of Brahmin, Rāsdhari, Sutradhari, Arāᅅgpham, and women. Understanding these roles not only safeguards cultural memory but also cultivates admiration for the contributions of individuals who uphold and pass on these traditions, guaranteeing their perpetuation for future generations. This highlights the study's relevance in safeguarding and honoring Manipuri cultural identity and heritage.

### **Research Methodology**

The current study is centered on Rās Līla, a Vaishnavite dance form of Manipur. The study, being a study of the Rās Līla of Govindaji Temple, necessitates looking at the phenomenon from the lens of cultural history and cultural memory, as this tradition is transmitted through generations of cultural memory. So, in order to achieve the goals of this research work, i.e., to understand the collective effort of the significant personalities, extensive fieldwork is conducted from the days of the rehearsal

and also by involving the collection of materials and personal interviews with tradition experts, as well as documenting and observing the performances at Shri Govindaji Temple, enhancing the authenticity and depth of the collected information.

### **The Role of Brahmin**

Brahmin, locally known as bhamon, play a significant role in organising the sacred Rās Līla of Govindaji Temple. Their intervention in this performance starts with the fixing of a favourable day to commence the rehearsal. On the first day of rehearsal, a senior Brahmin performs panchadevata puja in front of all the women who are going to take on the role of Gopis. After this ritual, the women participants will seek blessings from the Brahmin for a smooth journey to performance.

The role of Brahmin is numerous on the day of the performance. From the temple, the Brahmins will bring the idols of Lord Govinda and Rasheshori from their altars, which they will keep at the centre of the Rās Mandap (Rās Pavilion). They will adorn the idol with new costumes and lay out the necessary items and offerings to commence the performance. Before the performance begins, a brahmin will do the “Ghat Sthapana” and sanctify the artistes who are to take the roles of Goddesses with vedic rituals. He also offer the “Pratikal puja” to clear off the previous sins done by them (Ibochouba 132). There is a widely held idea that those who participate in a Rās dance portraying the characters of Rādhā and Kṛishᅅᅅā experience favourable circumstances in their lives. After the end of each episode during the performance, the Brahmin will offer the sacred aarti to the idols and he will sprinkle the sankhajal on everyone present there. The Brahmins also carries the idols back to the altar at the temple after the performance is over.

### **The Role of Rāsdhari**

The involvement of a Rāsdhāri (teacher of Rās Dance) is very essential for the proper organisation of a Rās Līla. The Rāsdhari, similar to a director in a theatrical production, has a crucial role in coordinating the entire spectacle of Rās Līla. His guidance and support system are crucial in the sense that he has years of in-depth knowledge of the Rās tradition at Govindaji Temple and its intricacies. He possesses extensive knowledge of the regulations governing the temple and Rās Līlā, making the women participants a valuable source of information on the practices and complexities associated with both



the rehearsals and the main performance (Sharma Interview).

On the first day of rehearsal, after the Panchadevata Puja, he will start teaching the women participants the fundamental steps of the Manipuri dance called Chali. He trains the female participants with great care and passion so they can grasp the intricate steps, even though the women are amateurs at dancing. He has the unique ability to organise the rehearsal without any issue, with a touch of devotion and care. The Rāsdhari performs a ritual known as Lai Barton Houba on the last day of rehearsal. This is a traditional ritual of giving invitations to the idols of Radha and Govinda. It is offered to the temple. This invitation is also given to the women at the Rās Mandap, considering that they are also Gopis who will take part in the divine Rās performance on the next day. It is a belief system of the Meitei Vaishnavites to request the lord for this divine presence in the ritual or festival that is going to take place. On the day of the performance, he plays the percussion instrument.

The Rāsdhari, a man of exemplary integrity and unwavering faith in God and his religion, has the duty of leading the sacred performance. Due to his deep bhakti (devotion), he is given the responsibility of instructing students without considering their caste, creed, or age. The Rāsdhari, similar to a choreographer, must skillfully manage the complex choreography and assure the flawless performance of the Rās Līla. With his exceptional problem-solving skills, he effectively overcomes problems while preserving the integrity of the religious performance.

### **The Role of Sutradhari**

Songs hold an essential significance in Manipuri Rās Līla. During a Rās Līla, one of the primary focus of the attendees is the song. The gurus or developers of Rās Līla have shown great wisdom in skillfully coordinating all the components of the dance, including the song and lyrics, music, and corresponding movements, resulting in a splendid and captivating dance performance for the audience. The conch player, flutist, and israj player bring life to the performance with their distinct musical harmonies.

Women who are skilled in singing, having a pleasant voice, and excellent pronunciation, is unable to perform the role of a Sutradhari. An artist who possesses a profound love and passion for music, demonstrates exceptional discipline, has received training, maintains a strong connection with her guru, possesses extensive knowledge of Rās Līla including its various plots,

characters, and the emotions portrayed by the characters, possesses a deep understanding of religious matters, and has a keen sense of the nuances of love and devotion to God, along with a gifted voice, is capable of fulfilling the role of a Sutradhari. In addition, she emphasizes that a Sutradhari must exhibit exceptional vocal capabilities, including precise pitch, control, a wide vocal range, and the ability to modulate their voice to accurately convey the emotional nuances of the song (Devi 162).

The profession of Sutradhari has been practiced continuously from long ago to the present day. She has a profound knowledge and understanding of the story of the Rās Līla, the indept philosophy, the theme, time and setting, the characters, and the transition of the episode. She is a person who has a deep respect and love for the art of singing, a clear and melodious voice, one who knows the tune, the rhythm, one who knows how to dance, rhythm of the pung, etc. While singing out, she is able to vividly animate the acts of the different characters and stories through their vocal delivery. She should have a profound understanding of the age of tradition and system of the Rās Mandap. She possesses qualities such as a strong believer in god, Prem Bhakti, resilient, one who does not have pride, a stable mind and heart, respectful, one who exudes gentleness and calmness in public, good body gesture, and clear complexion. She posses the art to bridge any shortcomings while performing without showing any odd attitude.

### **The Role of Arāngpham**

Shambhasa, also known as Arāngpham (arranger), is an essential person in the management of Meitei religious rituals and celebrations. They have an important role in fulfilling a diverse variety of duties that are essential for organising the Sankirtan and Rās Līla of Manipur. Below is a detailed examination of the importance of Arāngpham and their responsibilities:

1. Preparation of Ritual Items: The Arāngpham is in charge of carefully obtaining all the things that are needed for the event and rite. Making or arranging things like incense sticks, Lei Chandan (sandalwood and flowers), pana-heiruk (betel nut and fruit arrangements), and traditional clothes are all part of this.
2. Distribution of traditional gifts and offerings: During the event, the Arangpham makes sure that the officials, such as the Rāsdhari, the Sutradhari, the musicians, and the other players, get their traditional offerings on time. In a religious setting, these traditional offerings show respect and loyalty. They are also in charge of distributing fruits and

other offerings to the people who are attending the performance.

3. Welcoming the guest (devotees): Another important job of the Arāngpham is to greet people and show them their places to sit. They make sure that everyone is sitting in the right place to witness the ritualistic performances and that everyone is well settled. Arāngpham needs to know the important gestures to greet and talk to people of all ages, from little kids to old people. They provide a welcoming and comfortable environment for everybody, which builds a sense of unity and respect.
4. Timing and Ritual Execution: Arāngpham has received specialised training to provide a variety of aspects at precisely the proper timing during the performance.
5. Presence of mind and problem solving: The Arāngpham solves problems or confusion that may arise throughout the ceremonial process. They make sure the event goes on without any issues by gracefully managing any possible problems. Their ability to adjust to unforeseen circumstances and act quickly when needed allows them to keep the event on schedule.
6. Sense of Humility: An Arangpham must possess humility and groundedness. They have to show respect to every participant and attendee, regardless of their age or standing in the community.

The above illustrations show that, the successful conduct of religious rites is the responsibility of the esteemed profession of Arāngpham. This is a multifaceted duty that includes everything from gathering ritual supplies to making sure the ceremony goes off without a hitch and handling any problems that may come up.

### **The Role of Women**

The gracious presence of women has been vital to making this magnificent performance possible since its inception. Meitei women have been well recognised for their exceptional courage, a characteristic deeply embedded in their historical heritage and clearly shown in legendary narratives. During the challenging task of organising Rās Līla, numerous important factors emphasise the vital role of women. Only women are allowed to enter and perform the Rās dance in front of the two idols in the Rās Mandap of Shri Govindaji Temple.

When the idols of Radha and Govinda are taken from their shrine to the Rās Mandap, the symbolic gesture of

the idol of Radha leading displays a profound reverence and esteem for women within this cultural heritage. The ladies, referred to as Malini, who work at the Shri Govindaji temple and are in charge of making flower garlands, also serve as an example of the significant contribution made by women in the meticulous aspects of the event.

During the rehearsal phase, Brahmin give blessings to the women participants, emphasising the spiritual importance and divine link involved with their engagement. Men are prohibited from entering the Rās Mandap (pavilion). Participation in this sacred environment is restricted only to women. So, when the Brahmin enters the Rās Mandap to offer the aarti for the idols, he does so by adopting the psychological state of the Gopis and with his head covered with cloth. According to Manipuri Vaishnavite tradition, being born as a girl is seen as highly fortunate and blessed. This idea originates from the recognition that women ie, the Gopis have the ability to personally provide service to lord Krishna, a privilege that is not granted to males. Hence, the complex fabric of Meitei culture and tradition is intricately connected with the lasting contributions of Meitei women, who have consistently held a pivotal and respected position throughout history.

### **Result and Discussion**

This paper explores the diverse responsibilities of different individuals engaged in the organization and execution of the Rās Līla at Govindaji Temple, Manipur. This study emphasized the crucial role played by Brahmin, Rāsdhari, Sutradhari, Arāngpham, and women in safeguarding and perpetuating this sacred legacy. It also emphasized the complex organizational features and profound spiritual importance inherent in the Rās Līla, based on extensive fieldwork and interviews. The Brahmins play a role in performing rituals and making the performance space sacred. The Rāsdhari coordinate rehearsals and teach dance steps. The Sutradhari sing and express the narratives. The Arāngpham are the arrangers. The women embody the divine characters. The combined endeavor of these esteemed individuals creates a rich fabric of creative expression and spiritual depth. Their exceptional skills and specialized knowledge preserve the cultural richness of the sacred Rās tradition and contribute to its continuity as a vibrant living performance. In light of the challenges posed by globalization to cultural preservation, it is crucial for the current generation to recognize and respect the important contributions fulfilled by these esteemed individuals.



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