CHAPTER - THREE

ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT OF MANIPURI NAT SANKIRTANA
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3.1 Vaishnavism in Manipur: Its Impact on Manipuri Culture and Literature:

So far the history of Vaishnavism in Manipur is concerned enough has been written by the various scholars. After reviewing various opinions of the scholars, it is observed that it is really difficult to make a conclusive opinion about the exact year of the entry of Vaishnava religion in Manipur. However, the advent of Vaishnavism had been marked by the installation of the image of *Vishnu* in a temple at Lamangdong by king Kyamba (1467-1508).\(^1\) In fact, the image of Vishnu was received by King Kyamba from the Shan chief of Burma in 1470.\(^2\) The Manipuri Royal Chronicle "*Cheitharol Kumbaba*" also mentioned about the appointment of some Brahmins for the worship of Lord Vishnu in Manipur, during the time of Kyamba. Ironically, it is difficult to ascertain whether king Kyamba was initiated to Vaishnavism or not. Indeed, Vaishnavism remained in the

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court of Manipur as a religious faith and a way of worship. However, the king never disturb the traditional of faith of the mass.\(^3\)

The history of the emergence of Vaishnavism in Manipur has been categorised into three distinct phases. The Manipuri scholar K. B. Singh is of the opinion that the first phase of Vaishnavism entered into Manipur during the reign of King Charairongba (1697-1709). This phase of Vaishnavism was called 'Nimandi', probably, a distorted pronunciation Nimbarkar cul of Vaishnavism. The second phase of Vaishnavism was called 'Ramandi'. This phase entered during the period of Garibniwaj (Pamheiba) and finally Chaitanya School or Gauria School of Vaishnavism arrived in Manipur during the reign of King Jai Singh or Bhagyachandra.\(^4\) Therefore, according to him three district schools of the Vaishnavite faith appeared in Manipur during the 18th century and each of the school succeeded its predecessor in the favour of the ruling monarch.

'Cheitharol Kumbaba' mentioned that Charairongba (1697-1709) was the first Manipuri to be formally initiated into Vaishnavism.\(^5\) Bamon Khunthoklon refers to the immigration of Brahmins from various corners of India during the reign of

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Charairongba. In October, 1703 A.D., a Brahmin, named Rai Banamali from Sweta Ganga, Puri, arrived in Manipur. King Charairongba acknowledged his gratitude to his preceptor by assigning him a place of honour. The king gifted him a sort of Gurudakshina of a village, a hill and 100 acres of paddy field to the Guru. He also constructed a brick temple of Radha-Krishna at Brahmapur, Guru Aribam Leikai. The Manipuri chronicle ‘Cheitharol Kumbaba’ mentions –

“In the year 1626 Saka (1704 AD) the month of Shajibu (March/April) began on a Saturday. On the 5th day a Wednesday, king Charairongba and those who were to take the sacred thread fasted on that very same day. They took the sacred thread on a subsequent day.”

However, there has been a difference of opinion regarding the actual sect of Vaishnavism that was adopted by King Charairongba. But it is a fact that whatever might be the school of Vaishnavism that was adorned in the court of Charairongba, it could not produce much impact on the Manipuri mass. It remained in the court of Manipuri King.

6. Dr. M. Kirti: Op cit. p. 120.
8. Chaitharol Kumbaba – Op cit. p. 56. (Translated version is being taken from S.N. Parrot – Religion of Manipur.)
King Mayaamba, better known as Pamheiba or Garibniwaj ascended to the throne of Manipur in 1709 A.D. His attitude to religion was no less energetic than his attitude to warfare. During his rule, process of Hinduization of Manipur got its momentum. In 1720 A.D. a Vaishnava Saint from Narshingtola of Sylhet, named Shantidas Adhikari came to Manipur with his followers, Bhagawandas and Narandas. Apparently, Garibniwas was convinced enough by Ramanandi Saint Shantidas Goswami to declare 'Ramandi' (corrupt of Ramanandi Sect of Vaishnavism) as state religion. He installed the images of Rama, Lakshmana and others in Ramji Temple and another temple of Hanuman at 'Mahabali' on the bank of Imphal River and encouraged regular worship of the deities. King Garibniwaj undertook several measures to popularise the new faith in Manipur. He adorned his his court scholars to translate the two great epics Ramayana and Mahabharata, into the Manipuri language. It is believed that Garibniwaj burnt many books of the old faith of the Manipuri people. His religious policy produced far reaching consequence in the history of Manipur. However, his efforts to Vaishnavise the people produced wholesome literary and cultural awakening among the people. During the reign of King Jai Singh (1763-1789), popularly known as Rajarshi Bhagyachandra, the Chaitanya or

Gauria school of Vaishnavism emerged as the religion of the state. Perhaps, the word 'Gauria' appears for the first time in the 'Chaitharol Kumbaba' during the reign of Garibniwaj. But the sect could not consolidate its position in Manipur during the reign of Garibniwaj. It was only during the period of King Jai Singh that the Gauria sect of Vaishnavism established its firm footing in Manipur Valley. Apparently the introduction of 'Gauria' or Chaitanya school of Vaishnavism led to the most creative and the most glorious period in the social and cultural history of Manipur. Consequently, the successors of Jai Singh followed his footsteps in religious matter.

Religious believes of any community are basically reflected on the life, society, culture and literature of the people. Likewise, when the Manipuri people were brought with the Brahmanical Hinduism, their Gods and Goddesses were identified with the Gods of Hinduism. So that the transition of the people from a Pre-Aryan group into a Brahmanical Hindu caste was facilitated and the absorption into wider Hindu world became easy. Dr. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee observed –

"In Meitei society we have a definite attempt at translating things Meitei into

terms of Sanskrit. Thus, e.g. the Salais or Clans of the Meitei were connected with the Gotras of Brahmin. The result of this kind of harmonisation on integration which has been going on in India ever since Aryans and Pre-Aryans met on the soil of India and set about forming a single culture."

Vaishnavism came to the valley of Manipur, to be reborn, synthesising the old with the new and expressing a composit culture. Manipuri literature has emerged as the most potent and effective instrument for the propagation and popularisation of the Rich Cultural heritage of India in Manipur. The Rigveda, the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, Srimad Bhagavata Purana and the other text books of Brahmanical Hinduism like the Bhagavad Gita, Manu Samhita, Geetgovinda, Govinda Leelamrita etc. has been translated into elegant Manipuri and published with original Sanskrit texts. Manipuri literature is, thus fast growing up as a living organism providing an opportunity for synthesis, integration and propagation of the rich Indian cultural heritage among the Tibeto-Burman people in this state and the North-Eastern part of India.

From the time of King Garibniwaj (1709-1748) of Manipur, the Manipuri people, through the influence of Bengali Vaishnavas of the Chaitanya School from Nabadwip and Sylhet, accepted in Bengali script which has now become their own script with the exclusive Manipuri style of pronunciation. Virtually, it has enabled the Manipuri people to come in intimate touch with the Bengali speaking people as well as Sanskrit literature and energised themselves with the culture of the mainland of India. Therefore, a new period of the history of Manipuri literature has began from the reign of Garibniwaj. Prof. Ch. Manihar says -

“In order to make his identification with the new culture completely, he ordered to composed an entirely different chronicle called the ‘Vijay Panchali’ in Bengali language with Poyar Chhanda tracing the lineage to the first king of Manipur to Chitrabhanu, the great grandson of Ananta whose only child and daughter Chitrangada got married to Arjuna, the third of the Pandavas and had by him a son, Babrubahana and whose son Yavistha was identified with Nongda Laien Pakhangba.”

Who is believed as the first recoeded king of the Manipuris.

It is evident that, the vaishnavite movement in Manipur created a new epoch in Manipuri literature and art in the 18th century. The people of Manipur took Bengali language and culture excepted under the royal patronage. On the other hand, a strong current of Manipuri scholars were writing in their mother tongue and in their script in response to the Bhakti Movement. They simply refused to give up their own language and script and continued to respond to the flowering of Vaishnavite culture by transferring into popular speech the whole central story or certain episodes of the *Mahabharata* and also the story of *Ramayana*. It was during the reign of king Garibniwaj, one Kshema Singh Moiramba was invited to composed the *Ramayana* in the Manipuri language. For this purpose he engaged five young scholars who were well versed in the Bengali language. They were Premananda Nongyai Khumanthem, Mukundaram Khoisam, Lakshinarayan Soiba, Ramcharan Nongthomba and Lakshminarayan Saikhuba. They composed seven volumes of Manipuri Ramayana based on *Kritibasi Ramayana*. Perhaps, it was almost an independent work taking liberty with the original text and adding much of their creative imagination. Angom Gopi and Murari were the great scholars who adorned the court of Garibniwaj who

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16. Ibid. – p. 112.
composed 'Virabahu Tuba' (Fall of Birabahu) which in fact, should be a part of Lanka Kunda. It was under the patronage of Rajarshi Bhagyachandra that Konthouja Labanya composed 'Ram Nongaba' (Heaven ward Rama) based on the later section of 'Utta Kanda' of the Ramayana. At the last part of the 18th century when Vaishnavism was at its height in Manipur, three scholars namely Nabachandra Wangkhei, Haricharan Thounapalon and Wahengbam Madhavram composed 'Chingthangkhomba Maharaj Ganga Chatpa'. It is the story of the journey of the pilgrimage to Nabadwip by King Bhagyachandra.

3.2 Origin and Development of Manipuri Nat Sankirtana:

The Manipuri style of Sankirtana is known as 'Nat Sankirtana'. Noted Manipuri scholar Prof. E. Nilkanta observed –

"The Manipuri musician singing 'Kirtana' is Nata – a term in Sanskrit meaning a person who knows the four 'Abhinayas'\textsuperscript{17} and different types of 'Natya' gets himself merged in the 'Rasa' which he is trying to portray and who appears physically on the

\textsuperscript{17} According to the Natya Sastra of Bharata Four \textit{Abhinayas} are: (a) Angika, (b) Bachika (c) Aharya and (d) Svattirka.
'Mandapa' a dance with songs on lips. As a matter of fact, Manipuri Nata Sankirtana represents an extension of Leela Kirtana of Thakur Narottam Das of Bengal, with the application of pure type of Alpa, Raga, Tals etc. and with Gourachandra singing the glory of Krishna Chaitanya by way of an invocation and thought his vision (Bhavi) the entire Brindavan Leela of Krishna and the Gopis would be enacted.”

It is also a fact that, Nat Sankirtana is a composite version of music, dance and tala, a Sangeet in the true sense of the term. It is also 'Drishya Kavya, - a poem made visible. In fact, Nat Sankirtana is a collective prayer, a meditation and a great sacrifice (Maha Yajna) with lot of rituals, movement and patterns, based on Vaishnavite faith coloured with old Manipuri tradition. It is basically patterned on Vaishnavite philosophy and aesthetics integrated with the traditional beliefs of the Manipuri people. So, it is clear that, Nat Sankirtana is definitely an extension of Kirtana and Sankirtana. Therefore, it will be convinient to analyse the meaning of Kirtana before discussing on Nat Sankirtana. It is said that, the lexical meaning of the

word 'Kirtana' is laudatory recitale of the name and the qualities of a person. Further, more its technical meaning consists of the repeated utterance of the name and description of the qualities of the divine being or beings. According to the vaishnava tradition, 'Kirtana' is the second of the nine 'Lakshanas' or modes of 'Bhakti' (devotion). But, in a still more technical sense, it means 'a variety of devotional music used in singing the names or praise of the God. The 'Srimad Bhagawad Purana' referse to Kirtana as the best form of worship to attain salvation.\(^{19}\)

In view of the reference of 'Chaitanya Bhagawad' it can be presumed that the origin of the Kirtana is closely connected with the myths and legends of the Hindus of ancient India. The fact also clearly indicates that it is one of the most important aspects of the Vaishnavas. However, it is still not easy to identify the people who started the Kirtana. It is believed that a group of Brahmin, who worshiped 'Vishnu' in South India, knows as 'Alvars' were the earliest people who popularised 'Kirtana' in the ancient time.\(^{20}\) In fact, it is a fact that, the Alvar saints of South India developed a kind of devotional poetry of a high order and sang their compositions in the shrines and other places of worship in the ancient time. The Marathi saint, Saint Tukaram compared 'Kirtana' to the river Ganga. according to

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19. Srimad Bhagawat Purana: Sloke - 12:3:52
him, it is a countercurrent of purification in as much as the Ganga, rising from the Lotus of Lord Vishnu and comes down on the earth for purification of mortals; and the stream of Bhakti (devotion) in Kirtana, rising from the heart of mortal men goes upward and reaches the feet of ‘Hari’ (Vishnu).\textsuperscript{21}

It is observed that the first reference of Kirtana singing in Eastern India was during the reign of Lakshman Sen of Bengal in the medieval times. Because, Sri Khagendralal Mitra opines that in Bengal the Kirtana tradition was popularised by the Vaishnav poet Jaidev,\textsuperscript{22} who was a contemporary of Lakshman Sen of the Sen dynasty. Jaidev’s ‘Gitagovindam’, the masterpiece of the great Vaishnava poet, played an important role in popularising ‘Kirtana’ singing in Bengali particularly during the reign of Lakshman Sen.\textsuperscript{23} The ‘Padavalis’ of Chandidas and Bidyapati also played remarkable role in the succeeding years. The emergence of Chaitanya gave a new impetus to the Kirtana tradition. He introduced a new pattern of Kirtana which is known as ‘Sankirtana’.\textsuperscript{24} In fact, it is a systematised singing of Kirtana synchronised with Mandira (cymbal) and ‘Khol’. Following the footsteps of Chaitanya, his followers Sribas, Mukunda, Haridas, Gauridas, Advaita, Nityainanda and Godadhara sang

\textsuperscript{21} Sri Khagendralal Mitra: Kirtana, Vishwa Bharati, 1352 Bangla; p 4
\textsuperscript{22} ibid; p. 18.
the 'Padavalis' of Chandidas and Bidyapati. Later on in 16th and 17th centuries the Bengal Vaishnava poets namely, Govinda Das, Gyan Das, Narahari Sarkar, Luchan Das, Srinivas Acharya, Syamananda Das and Narottam Das enriched the Vaishnava literary treasure and it gained a new height. Therefore, this is pre-eminently due to the teachings of Chaitanya that 'Sankirtana' tradition flourished in Bengal, and Chaitanya is considered to be the father of 'Sankirtana'.

Kirtana singing in Bengal reached the highest point of emotional expression through music, largely due to the influence of Chaitanya and his followers. The musical instruments such as 'mridanga' (drum) and 'mandira' (cymbal) are said to have been invented by Chaitanya himself, who wanted to make Kirtana the expression of his 'religion of love'. Therefore, by introducing 'Sankirtana' as adaptable to mass singing and making its musical accompaniments simple and available to all, Chaitanya's object was fulfilled in a large measure, for a wave of enthusiasm passed over the country.

Prof. E. Nilkanta Singh observed that 'Kirtana' singing entered Manipur during the reign of King Kyamba (1467-1508) from Bengal via Assam. But it is very difficult to ascertain about the exact style of singing during the period. Further, the noted Manipuri musicologist Laishram Birendra Kumar opines

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that the kirtana tradition entered into Manipur prior to the emergence of both Sankardev (Neo-Vaishnava Saint of Assam) and Chaitanya. He also said that, the 'Ojapali' kirtana pattern of Assamese Kirtana has a close affinity with early kirtanas of Manipur. There is no difference of opinion among the scholars that in Manipur the Kirtana singing was started with the installation of 'Vishnu' idol during the reign of King Kyamba. However, scholars are not sure about the exact style of 'Kirtana' adorned in the prayer during that period. Chaitharol Kumbaba mentioned that, during the reign of King Kyamba (1597-1652) Kirtana singing became a regular feature in the worship of Lord Vishnu in Manipur. The noted Nat Sankirtana Guru, Athokpam Parijat opined that during those days kirtana in Manipur was basically confined to the 'Bhog Arati' style. Aribam Chitreshwar Sharma viewed that during reign of Khagembha in Manipur a number of Kirtana from Bengal immigrated and started kirtana singing in Manipur. He also mentioned the names of Kirtanas who had participated in the Kirtana while offering prayer to Lord Vishnu. They were Yadavadas, Gouridas and Debidas. Actually that was first instance of systematic performance of Kirtana in Manipur.

28. ibid; p. 17.
Banamali from *Sweta Ganga* came to Manipur and he initiated the king into Vaishnavism. Subsequently the king patronised Vaishnava devotional singing of kirtana. In the meantime, large number of Bengali Kirtania entered into Manipur. Their style of singing of kirtana was popularly known as 'Bangdesh Pala'. During these days, the daily worship of Lord Krishna the 'Bangdesh Pala' was regularly sang.³⁰ King Charairongba was succeeded by his son Pamheiba alias Garibniwas. He declared *Ramanandi Vaishnavism* as the state religion of Manipur During his period the second wave of Bengali Kirtana arrived in Manipur. The Manipuri chronicle *Chaitharol Kumbaba* mentioned that during these days *Kirtanas* were regularly performed in the *Shraddha Ceremony* of dead person.³¹ It is also revealed that *Bangdesh Pala* was generally devoted to the prayers of Ramji Prabhu. However, in course of time the Kirtanias were organised into several groups namely – 'Pala Ahan' (earliest group) 'Ariba Pala' (Bangdesh Pala), 'Naha Pala' (Young Pala) and 'Sevak Pala' for the prayer of Lord Krishna and Ramji Prabhu.³²

Prof. E. Nilkanta viewed that, the Bangdesh style of kirtana was introduced by a Bengali Kirtania who came possibly from Bengal but adopted the Manipuri name 'Konthou Ojha'.

He also said that, the style indicate more affinity with the Assamese ‘Ojhapali’ and less with the old style of Bengali Kirtana; even though much of the Manipuri folk tunes have been integrated into it. The first inspiration for this style was Ramanandi culture with the wording like ‘Ramo-Ramo-Govinda’ etc. According to him it was the fore runner of the Nat Sankirtana singing in Manipur.\(^33\)

The reign of Jai Singh (Bhagyachandra, 1763-1798) in Manipur is regarded as the most important period in the history of Manipuri Kirtana. Being an ardent follower of Gauria School of Vaishnavism, he revolutionised the movement in Manipur by introducing a number of innovative creations in the field of religious life of the Manipuri people. In the year 1779, he introduced a new style of kirtana in Manipur, which is known as Nat Sankirtana. However, the introduction of Nat Sankirtana in Manipur was not a sudden matter, it has long history of evolution.

King Jai Singh alias Bhagyachandra was born and brought up in Vaishnava tradition. In his youth he was a pupil of Ram Gopal Bairagi.\(^34\) He learnt a lot from the Bairagi about the various sects of Vaishnavism. Later on, when he became the king of Manipur, he declared Gauria vaishnavism as the state

\(^33\) N. Sanajaoba (ed.): Manipur Past and Present, Vol.-2, New Delhi, 1991; p. 259.
\(^34\) Dr. M. Kirti: Op.cit, p. 139.
religion. Actually, Jai Singh ascended the throne in the year 1764 A.D. But confronted several attacks of the Burmese during his rule in Manipur. From 1764 to 1793 he lost and regained his power at least three times. He was forced to fled in Cachar and Ahom territory. As a matter of fact, he sought the help of the Ahom King Rajeshwar Singh and consequently he regained his lost kingdom. The matter has been narrated in a Manipuri manuscript called ‘samuphaba’, that the Burmese, at the instigation of Khelemba (Chief of Moirang) invaded Manipur and defeated jai Singh. Jai Singh took shelter at the Ahom Court. Therefore, Khelemba sent thirty men with a letter to Ahom King, explaining that the fugitive Manipuri was an imposter and he should be executed. Then, the Ahom King decided to test Jai Singh through an elephant ordeal. Accordingly, he was asked to touch the tusks of a drunken elephant inside a big encloser before an audience, with the promise that, if he would come out unhurt he would be furnished with army and wealth for the liberation of his country from the Burmese. King Jai Singh spent the whole night fasting, meditating and praying ‘Sri Govindaji’. He had dreamt that the Lord consoled him not to worry at the ordeal. He prayed to Lord Krishna who instructed him that ‘He’ would growing as a Jack-fruit tree in the Kaina Hill and asked him to make his image from the said tree after regaining the throne. On the day of the ordeal, the Ahom King and his nobles took their seats in the gallery. Jai
Singh made prayer after a bath and dressed himself like a mendicant. He entered the big encloser. On seeing saintly king, the mad elephant came in front of him, strick its tusk, to the ground and sat hypnotised. King Jai Singh sat on the back of the elephant. Then the people of Assam praised Jai Singh - "Glory of King Karta" (The people of Assam used to call him 'Karta Maharaja'). In fact, the above narrated story is a popular legend of the Manipuris. However, no contemporary Ahom record, so far published, mentioned this incident. Prof. Birendranath Dutta opined that, according to the 'Tungkhungia Buranjee', king Jai Singh was accompanied by the Kachari Raja, who had arrived at the Ahom capital and elaborate arrangements were made for the welcome them. The Buranjee also mentioned that a Bhaona* was arranged in which seven hundred artists took part. The 'Ankia Nat'™ play entitled 'Ravana Bhad' was also performed.35

While, King Bhagyaachandar (Jai Singh) was in excile in Cachar, he visited 'Sri Mandir' at 'Daka Dakshin' in Sylhet, where he met Ramnarayan Siromoni, a descendant of Upendra Mishra, grand-father of Sri Chaitanya. Perhaps, king Bhagyaachandar was highly impressed by Siromoni's exposition of the ideal of Sri chaitanya. In fact, he had initiated into Gauria

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*Bhaona: A Traditional Vaishnava Theoretical Performance of Assam
™ Ankia Nat: Vaishnava Dance-Drama of Assam.
Vaishnavism from Ramnarayan Siromoni and persuaded him to visit Manipur. Therefore, the above discussion reveals that due to various misfortune, king Bhagyachandra visited extensively in the various regions of the North-East India and he was greatly impressed by the Vaishnava thoughts and aesthetics of the period. King Bhagyachandra, after his restoration in Manipur, carried out his promise to the Lord Krishna. With the help of the Pandits, he set-out for Kaina hill and ultimately he found the Jack-fruit tree and he commanded his men to make the image of Govindaji from the wood of the Jack-fruit tree. Consequently, the making of the image of Sri Govinda was completed in the month of November 1776. Meanwhile, Bhagyachandra intended to make Gauria Vaishnavism as the state religion of Manipur and he invited some Vaishnava Missionaries from Bengal. According to the Guru Pranalika tradition five Gauria Vaishnava preachers namely, Ganga Narayan Chakraborty, Krishnacharan Chakraborty, Kunja Behari, Nidhiram Acharya and Thakur Ram Gopal Bairagi from Bengal visited Manipur and propagate Gauria Vaishnavism in Manipur. Notably, they all belonged to Narottam Paribar of Gauria Vaishnavism. In 1779, the image of Govindaji was installed at Langthabal.

38. Vijay Panchali: Mentioned that last three preachers were already in Manipur prior to the reign of Jai Singh; pp. 213-214.
39. Chaitharol Kumbaba; p. 117.
installation ceremony was held in Rasamandal (Langthabal Palace) in the same year. In the occasion five day long Rasleela, it was performed for the first time in Manipur. As the Nat Sankirtana is to be performed mandatorily as a preface of Rasleela, in the installation ceremony of Govindaji in 1779 for the first time, Nat Sankirtana was performed in Manipur. King Bhagyachandra himself played on 'Pung' as partner of his uncle Ngaubram Sai. Therefore, King Bhagyachandra opened a new chapter in the Manipuri socio-cultural life. It became an integral part of Manipuri socio-religious life. Nat Sankirtana which was introduced by Bhagyachandra found its supreme expression during the reign of King Chandrakirti (1850-1886) in Manipur.

3.3 Basic structure of Manipuri Nat Sankirtana:

3.3.1 Preparation of Nat Sankirtana Mandali:

Manipuri Vaishnava believe the performing place of Nat Sankirtana as Sri Brindavan. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, to them Nat Sankirtana is a ‘Mahayajna’ (Great Sacrifice). Therefore, the construction of the Nat Sankirtana Mandali (performing place) have to be followed certain principles. According to the Manipuri Vaishnava tradition, the Mandali
must be constructed on eight number of pillars or poles. It is believed that, each of pillars are *Gopis* of Brindavan.\(^\text{42}\) The Mandali is basically divided into five major parts namely - (1) *Khonghampham*, (2) *Kuber Mandop*, (3) *Randhan Mandop*, (4) *Drabya Mandop* and (5) *Nikunja Mandop*.\(^\text{43}\) At the entrance area of the Mandali there sits the *Khonghampham*. It is the place where the departed soul is symbolically placed on the two pieces of banana trunk and washing the feets of the devotees. The Khonghampham is guarded by *Gopeshwar* (*Shiva*). On the other hand, in *Kuber* and *Drabya* Mandopa *Bhagawati*, in the *Randhan* Mandop Goddess *Lakshmi* and in the *Nikunja* Mandop *Sri Chattyana* are being worshiped at the very outset of the Nat Sankirtana.

### 3.3.2 Important participants of Manipuri Nat Sankirtana:

Manipuri Nat Sankirtana is usually performed by minimum seven number of male artists. Artists are known as *Palas*. Each of the *Palas* has symbolical names. The lead singer of the *Palas* is called *Ishei-hanba* in Manipuri. According to the Manipuri Vaishnava tradition he is presumed as ‘*Srinivas*’ who symbolically represents the ‘mind’ of Gouranga and Mukunda the associate of the *Ishei-hanba* is called ‘*Dohar*’ who represents

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\(^\text{42}\) *ibid*; p. 108.

\(^\text{43}\) *ibid*; p. 108.
the ‘Soul’; and the two Pung-yeibas (a pair of pung artists) are Advaita and Govinda who represent the intellect. Palas as by Murari who is symbolically represent by Nityainanda and remain as devotee of the Sankirtana. Apart from these main artists there other important participant who actively play their respective roles. Among them, Mandop Mapu, (head of the Mandali), Moibung Khongba, Arangpham, Sambhasha (receptionist), and Sevaris (helpers)

It is also presume that the Nat Sankirtana Mandali Nitai in the outh, in the west Madhavendra Puri, in north Srinivas and in the east Mukunda are remained present. The Mandali has a centreplace where a ritualistic Puja has to be perform by the host of the Nat Sankirtana. Actually, it is a prayer to Sri Chaitanya, Nityananda, Advaita, Godadhara and Srinivas. It is called Mandir Puja. After completing the Mandir Puja all instrument namely Pung, Kartal (Cymbol), Moibung (conch) which are to be used in the Nat Sankirtana are placed on white cloth serially in the centre of Mandali and after that a prayer to offered by all of participants because Manipuris have the tradition to believe the musical instruments as God.

3.3.3 ‘Bariba’ (Falicitation of the Artists):

After Mandir Puja, all the artists are to be seated in the

45. ibid p. 104.
floor of the Mandali in the circle taking a special position placing knees on floor and the body balanced on two feet, facing towards the centre of the Mandali. Then, the sevari (helpers) offer sandle paste, flower garlands, another sevari taking a mirror come in front of the every artiste ask to look on it. Next sevari place a piece of long cloth on the solder of the artists which called 'Bari Fee'. After that another sevari comes and offer bettlenut, pan and other some articles place on a artistically found cut banana leaf, called Panatangla and some coins on a piece of banana leaf. This is a kind of falicitation to the artists. In Manipuri it is called 'Bariba'. But it seems to be derived from the Bengali word Baran, meaning is welcome.

3.3.4 Beginning of the actual Nat Sankirtana:

(i) Raga Houba:

After the preparatory works being over the Palas, the Moibung Khongba and the Mandop Mapu who is repending Madhavendra Puri for the day standup circally in Mandali along with some devotees. The Mandop Mapu than makes the recitation of Jaidhvani in Brajabuli “Valiho premse kaho, Sri Radha Krishna Bhakta Prabhu Nitai Chaitanya Advaita kahata santa sadhu Madhura Rasa vani. Hare, Hare” When this recitation reaches
the word ‘Chaitanya’ the ‘Pung’ artists strike the bol. Three times – ‘Ten - Ten - Tat - Ta - Tang ... ...’ symbolising Gauranga Natai and immediately the ‘Moibung Khongba’ blows the conch simultaneously recite loudly – *Sri Krishna Preeti Anande Hari bol* and the other palas reciprocate by reciting ‘Hare Hare’. This is the prelude of the beginning of Nat Sankirtana. In Manipuri it is called *Raga Houba*. During this moment *Pung* continues to play without stoppage. In Manipuri Nat Sankirtana there are two types of ‘Raga’ namely, ‘Raga Achouba’ and ‘Raga Macha’. In the occasion of Shraddha ceremony Nat Sankirtana begins with ‘Raga Achouba’ which is the major *Raga of Pung*. The next step of pung bol is –

**Ginna-Gra-Dha-Dhen**

Which symbolising *Sri Radha-Krishna*.

It will be followed another bol of *Pung* –

**Ginna-Gra-Dhe-Ten-Ten-Ta-Tang**

Symbolising the invocation Sri Chaitanya in the Sankirtana Mandali.

Next is – **Ginna-Gra-Ghin-Ta**

**Ghin-Ten-Ten-Ten**

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46. Suggested by Mutum Chaubhal, Chandpur, noted Oung ojha of Barak Valley.
47. Manipuri Jagoi Seminar, *op cit*; p. 84.
Symbolising the propagation of *Shulla Nam.*) 48

This will be followed by another series of bol sequence of ‘*Pung*’ symbolising the installation of mental image of Sri Chaitanya from bottom to top.

Prof. E. Nilkanta says –

... “Set of rhythmic patterns are introduced for creating the various stage of image and one’s offerings to Krishna Chaitanya passing through the phases of progressive relation (Pravartak Sadhak and Siddha Deha) all the participants including the devotees are now metamorphosed into ‘Sakhis’ of Brindavana at the stage of Siddha. 49

Simultenously, the *Moibung Khongba* (conch player) blows the conch and *Pungs* plays their faster movement.

This will be followed by the *Raga* of *Ishei-hanba* (lead singer).

‘*Ta-Ri-Ta-Na*

*Ri-Ta-Na-Ta-Na*’

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48. Suggested by Mutum Chaubhal, Chandpur, *noted Oung ojha of Barak Valley.*

49. E. Nilkanta *op cit,* p. 7.
and it is followed by striking of kartal (cymbals) by the palas. This process is being repeated in cyclic order of Gora Dheerga and Panchama. The Ragas of Ishei-hanba also has a specific inner meaning. It is stated, the Raga is the symbolic installation of mental image of Sri Chaitanya in the Mandali.

(1) Ta – is the chest
(2) Ri – is the naval
(3) Ta – is the waist
(4) Na – is the leg
(5) Ri – is the arm
(6) Ta – is the head
(7) Na – is the eyes and years
(8) Ta – is the nose
(9) Na – is the face of Sri Krishna Chaitanya.  

This will be followed by a series of Pung’s specific bols along with the striking sounds of kartals of the Palas. This is known as Sancharas. Out of various Sancharas more, usually Kartic Sanchara is chosen. The symbolic inner meaning of the Sancharas of ‘Pung’ is ‘Pranpratistha’ (installation soul) of Sri Gauranga.

51. Ibid, p. 89.
(ii) Gaurachandrika (Tintal):

After finishing the Sancharas by the 'Pung Yeiba' they enter into the circle of the Palas, then Ishei-hanba start the singing of Subha Vandana and Guru Vandana (songs are included in Chapter-V). After that, the Ishei-hanba initiates the singing of 'Gaurachandrika' which is invocation of Gauranga. It is an integral part of Manipuri Nat Sankirtana. According to Gauria School of Vaishnavism to attain salvation one must have to purify himself through the invocation of Gauranga image mentally in mind and soul, then proceeds the singing of Sri Krishna Rasa Leela in the various stages of Nat Sankirtana. (Songs of Gaurachandra are included in Chapter-V). Therefore, it is the soul of the Nat Sankirtana. At this stage of singing the Tala follower by artists is called Tintal.

(iii) Rajmel:

After Gaurachandrika the next important stage of Manipuri Nat Sankirtana is Rajmel. In fact it is the climax stage of Nat Sankirtana. According to the Manipuri Nat Sankirtana tradition there are wight types of Rajmel. Basically, Rajmel consist of six semi-sequences, namely - Berighat, Lambighat, Melhau, Setughat, Mel-aonba and Mel-athaba. At the stage Berighat all the artists

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52. ibid, p. 89.
53. ibid, p. 130.
including Pung Yeiba pair more clock-wise upto the full round and then prostrate on the floor each other and Ishei-handa, Dohar and Pung-yeiba touch each other instruments this is called 'Yantra-Milon' in Manipuri. At this moment tyrical them is called 'Sawbhog' scholars mentioned that the inner meaning of this clock-wise movement is the symbolical pilgrimage to Nabadwip. During this, the singer and palas do not stop singing the appropriate lyrics of the Sankirtana. After that, all the palas again move anti-clocl-wise upto a full round symbolising the pilgrimage to Brindavan. During this time the lead singer and palas do not stop their singing. This system of tala is called Lambighat. This will be followed by another semi sequence which is called Setughat. In fact Setughat plays the role of bridge between two parts of the beries. Here the Dohar plays certain cholom. After completing Setughat, another part starts, called Mel Aonba meaning change. Here the lyrics of the singing may or may not change but rhythm have to be change here compulsarily. The artists play faster rhythm in this point of Nat Sankirtana and Rajmel will be finished by another semi sequence called Mel Athaba.

(iv) Tanchap:

Rajmel will immediately followed by another stage, which

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55. Dance Seminar, op cit; p. 132.
56. ibid, p. 132.
57. Cholom is the rythmic movement of Dohar.
is called *Tanchap*. In this stage of the Nat Sankirtana the *Palas* take the both *Kartal* on the left hand and the right plays different *Mudras* of dancing relating to the singing lyrics. On the other hand they also create the steppings of *Cholom* by the feet maintaining rhythm with the *Pung*. Usually during this stage various lyrics based on *Abhisar, Arurag* etc. are sang. (Songs are included in chapter-V).

**(v) Menkup:**

*Tanchap* is followed by another sequence called *Menmkup*. In this stage of Nat Sankirtana ‘*Dohar*’ display the graceful and complicated movements of *Cholom*. According to Prof. E. Nilkanta, it represents the increasing union (Purna Sambhog). In this point of the Nat Sankirtana also indicates through the lyrics that the *Gopis* who have been searching for flower etc. would come back and joint both Radha and Krishna. This would be indicated by the renewed offerings of insense light and *Lai Chandan* (Sandal paste) arranged by the *Arangpham*. Here generally, artists sing various *Padavali* songs appropriate to this stage. On the other hand, the departed soul is supposed (in case of Shraddha) to have been allowed to join the *Gopis* symbolically in their collective prayers to the Lord Krishna. This will be indicated by offering a ‘*Pana-Tangla*’ by *Khonghampham-in-charge* to the *Isheihanba* with prostration their after the
Isheihanba handover the Pana-Tangla to the Mandap Mapu with prostration. The inner meaning of this proceeding is symbolical attainment of Moksha (salvation) by the departed soul.

After Menkup the Nat Sankirtana continues with various other sequences which have the variation depending on the purpose of the day. However, the general trend is that the Menkup will follow by ‘Baitha’ means singing in sitting position. Usually in this stage Sambhog, Jalakeli and Swadhin etc. In the mean time, Arangpham arranged for the offering of ‘Phiroi’ to all artists, in a kind of felicitation are being done. It is called ‘Phiroi Thaba’ in Manipuri. After that, the Palas would recite the names of Six Goswamis of Brindavan which is called ‘Soi-Gosai’. This will be followed by the prayer of Nityainanda called ‘Nitaipada’ and simultaneously the Pung yeiba strike the bols of Pung attributed to Jai-Bhai that means Chaitanya-Nitai. In this point of time, the host and other members of the family lying prostrate, feeling blessed for the day. Then the Mandop Mapu declares the end of the Nat Sankirtana for the day by reciting jaidhvani and the Palas reciprocate by reciting Hare-Hare and this ends the Nat Sankirtana.

3.3.5 Arangpham:

Actually, the term Arangpham is derived from two Manipuri words ‘arang’ and ‘pham’. Whiach denotes one who arranges,
manages as well as directs. Truly speaking, Arangpham is the one who occupies the seat of the arranger, who directs and manages the ceremonies or the function. It has been referred that the Arangpham is the cultural architect of the Manipuris.Obviously, Arangpham plays very important role in the Nat Sankirtana too. Regarding the origin of Arangpham there is no uniform opinion among the scholars. Primarily, there are two school of thought regarding the origin of Arangpham. One is Gauria Vaishnavite School and the other is Sanamahi School of thought. According to the Gauria school the origin of Arangpham is associated with the rituals of Sankirtana. In the Sankirtana Srimati Radhika takes the role of the host as well as the Arangpham. She is the one who assigns the Sakhis Manjuris and to Srimati Purnimashi. On the other hand the Sanamahi school of thought believes that the origin of the post of Arangpham is associated with the Leishemba (The act of creation). According to this Panthoibi did the arrangement of the celebration of Leishemba. Therefore, she is regarded as the first Arangpham. Above all, Arangpham supervised the Sankirtana from the beginning to the end. The arrangement of Lei-Chandan, flower, Dhup, the felicitation of the artists Bariba, arranged the offerings of Bariba and Phiroi etc. Therefore it is quite clear that, Arangpham of the

58. Seminar Paper, Arangpham, the cultural architect of Manipur, Organised by, Harimati Dance and Music Centre, Imphal, 11/08/01 to 11/03/02.
Nat Sankirtana is a unique example of assimilation of old and new concept of traditions. However, *Arangpham* remain as the integral part of Manmipuri cultural life.

3.3.6 **Khong-hampham:**

*Khong-hampham* is another important component of Manipuri Nat Sankirtana. In this context noted scholars, Chitreshwar Sharma has view that, *Khonghampham* has been incorporated in Nat Sankirtana from the older Manipuri tradition ‘*Nongarol*’. Manipuri Vaishnava believes that soul of the departed person rests there on the two pieces of banana trunk and symbolically washes the feet of the devotees and remain there to here the Sankirtana. A person is to be seated there as a in-charge of the *Khonghampham* and he is symbolically understood as *Gopeshwar* -(mahadev). When the Sankirtana singing reach a particular stage, the *Khonghampham* supposed to bring a *‘Pana Tangla’* representing the soul of the departed person and handed over to the *Isheihanba* in the centre of the Sankirtana. At this point of time the soul permitted to take part in the collective prayer with the *Gopis*. After that, *Isheihanba* hand over it to the Salvation.61

3.3.7 **‘Mandap Mapu’ or ‘Kirtan Mapu’:**

A Nat Sankirtana can not be performed without *‘Mandop*

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61. Suggested by Moirangthem Babatombi.
Mapu’. He is the head and the initiator of the Nat Sankirtana of the day. He inaugurated the Sankirtana with the recitation of ‘Jaidhwan’. There is difference of opinion regarding the concept of Mandop Mapu. In Barak Valley he is more popularly called as ‘Kirtan Mapu’. Of course he acts as over all authority of the Sankirtana of the day. The Mandop Mapu symbolically represents Madhavendra Puri.

3.4 Musical instruments of Manipuri Nat Sankirtana:

3.4.1 ‘Pung’:

‘Pung’ is one of the most important musical instrument of Manipur Nat Sankirtana can not be performed with ‘Pung’. ‘Pung’ is typical Manipuri name of ‘Mridanga’, it has special characteristics. It has quit a different sound from other Mridanga or ‘Khol’ types of instruments. Like other Mridanga type musical instrument ‘Pung’ has two side leather but the body of ‘Pung’ is made of wood. Generally, wood of jackfruit tree or a type tree ‘Wang’ as called by the Manipuris. Manipuri Vaishnava identifies ‘Pung’ as Mridanga. Thakur Narottam Das in ‘Gaura Prenamrita’ says that Mridanga is the manifestation of Sri Radha and other Gopi’s love of Lord Krishna. However, Manipuri believe ‘Pung’ itself is Lord Krishna. Obviously, Manipuri Kirtanias worship the ‘Pung’

before any performance. They keep the ‘Pung’ in a secret place in the house. In fact, ‘Pung’ has a history of its origin. According to ‘Chaitharol Kumbaba’ it was during the reign of Manipuri king Khuitor Tompok (158-268 A.D.) ‘Pung’ was originated in Manipur.\textsuperscript{63} Originally, there were various types of Pung depending on its shape and the purpose. In the early days Manipuri people have Pung which called Khong, Harao-Pung, Lai-Pung, Yai-Pung, Tanyei-Pung, Khun-Pung and Lan-Pung etc. However, during the reign of Kyamba the Sankirtana Pung was evolved by taking certain features of ‘Mridanga’\textsuperscript{64}. Subsequently, in course of time Manipuri Kirtana started to use Khol, Pakhwaj, Dholok, Dafat, Khanjuri andTabla etc. Later on, with the introduction of Nat Sankirtana during the reign of Rajarshi Bhagyachandra, the ‘Nat-Pung’ was evolved which is also called ‘Pung-macha’\textsuperscript{65}. The colour of Pung is blackish and the body (wooden part) is covered by a thin white cloth. The belt for hanging purpose is specially made by thick cloth and the colour is purple.

3.4.2 Kortal (Cymbal):

Cymbal is known as Kortal in Manipuri. In Manipuri Kirtana two types of Kortal are being used depending on the

\textsuperscript{64} Ibid. p. 40.
types of Kirtana. One is 'Bangdesh Pala Kortal' and 'Nat Pala Kortal' is the other. Generally, Bangdesh Pala (Ariba Pala) is flater shape than Nat-Pala Kortal During the period of Rajarshi Bhagyachandra with introduction of Nat Sankirtana has been introduced in Manipur. Thus the Kortal of Nat Sankirtana became more thicker but size has been reduced. It is made of brass and its size is around $5\frac{1}{2}$ inches diameter. According to the Manipuri Kirtanias Kortal is identified as Sri Radha. It is also believed that the sound of Kortal represent the recitation of Shullanam. i.e. (Harinam Mahamantra)

\[
\begin{align*}
Hare Krishna, & Hare Krishna, \\
Krishna Krishna, & Hare Hare; \\
Hare Rama, & Hare Rama, \\
Rama Rama, & Hare Hare.
\end{align*}
\]

Manipuri Vaishnava worship Kortal as God.

3.4.3 **Mandila or Mandira:**

*Mandila* is the smaller Kortal. It has the radius of about $2\frac{1}{3}$ inches. It is inclusively used by the women Kirtanias.

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67. As told by M. Babatombi : The eminenti Nat Sankirtana Isheihaiba of Barak Valley.
Generally it is used Rasheshwari Pala, Jalakeli, Basak and by Sutradhari in Rasleela.

3.4.4 **Jhal**:

*Jhal* is also a Kortal type instrument with bigger in size. It is basically used in Nam Sankirtana or in Jagannath Arati and Holi-Pala etc. The radius of *Jhal* is around $8\frac{1}{2}$ inches.

3.4.5 **Mangang**:

*Mangang* is another type of *Kortal* which is smaller than *Jhal*. This type of musical instrument is generally used in the Assamese Kirtana in *Satras*. Probably it was taken from Assam during the rule of Bhagyachandra when he took shelter in Ahom territory. Generally *Mangang* is used in the *Nam Sankirtana* of dead body funeral procession and various Aratis.

3.4.6 **Moibung**:

In Manipuri conch is called *Moibung*. It is also an important musical instrument of Manipuri Nat Sankirtana. The conch player is called *Moibung Khongba* in Manipuri. In fact, *Moibung* has a very important role in Nat Sankirtana. However, in Barak Valley 'Moibung' is not used in the marriage and asthi sanchaya Nat Sankirtana. In a Nat Sankirtana of *Shraddha*, Moibung is played in the specific moment. Basically, in the proceedings of
Raga-houba, Mel Tanchap, Menkup and Jaibhai etc. The music of Moibung synchronised with Pung and Kortal.

3.5 Costumes of Nat Sankirtana:

One of the most important characteristics of Manipuri Nat Sankirtana is its distinctive costumes. Aribam Chitreshwar Sharma observed that the costumes of the Nat Sankirtana performer is distinctively different from the any other Sankirtana of India.\(^{68}\) He opined that it has been evolved by the Manipuris, basically based on the Vaishnava Philosophy of devotion (Bhakti) and traditional Manipuri costumes. Aparently, the basic guideline is the devotion.\(^{69}\)

The costumes of the Nat Sankirtana is called ‘Astabesh’ by the Manipuris which comprises (1) Tri-Kakchha Faijom, (2) Khwangjet (waist wrapper), (3) Lengyang-fee, (4) Koyet, (5) Tilak Dharan, (6) Leipareng with Lugun, (7) Nad-Nirmalya (8) Khujital. etc.\(^{70}\) The Manipuri Nat Sankirtana performers do not wear any upper garment, they use Lengyan-fee on the shoulder and Faijom (Dhoti) and a Khwangjet.

The designe of the costumes of Manipuri Nat Sankirtana represent various thought and philosophy of the Vaishnava. Particularly, the style of dressing of the Faijom is typical which

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69. ibid, p. 53.
is called 'Tinabanchha' means three desires. Aribam Chitreshwar Sharma interprets as 'Madhurja Prem' and 'Sukha'.\textsuperscript{71} Khwangjet is another important part of the costume of the Nat Sankirtana performer which is incorporated from the costume design of 'Maibi' in Lai Haraoba. It is made by stitching two pieces of white cloth together which represent God Lainingthou and Lairembi, obviously, a symbol of union of Prakriti and Purush.\textsuperscript{72}

'Koyet' is another important costumes of the Nat Sankirtana. It is a turban in white colour. Two types of Koyet are being used. One is Koyet Achouba and the other is Salai Koyet. Koyet Achouba is used by the Isheihaanba, Dohar and other Palas where as the Salai Koyet is used by the two Pung-yeibas.

Generally, white colour is the compulsory dress code of the Nat Sankirtana performers as well as the devotees. However, sometimes they also used the special kind of Phaijom which is called 'Khamen Chatpa Fee' or Khamen Chappa Fee' which are awarded by king of Manipur and his Pala Loishang as a mark of honour to the performers credibility in this field.

\textbf{*****}

\textsuperscript{71} Aribam Chitreshwar Sharma: \textit{Meitei Nongarol}; pp 5-6.