5. Raas Leela: An indigenous form of Hinduized dance theatre
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The Raas Leela and Nata Sankirtana created by king Bheigyachandra is taken entirely as one of his genius in the field of tradition and culture. These traditional art forms strengthened its hold with the strong support of the palatial patronage. The Raas Leela as created during his reign with a strong court support were Kunja Raas Leela, Maha Raas Leela and Basanta Raas Leela\(^1\). The Raas Leela choreographed by king Bheigyachandra is of two types; one specifically meant for Sri Govindaji mandap, and the other for Sri Bijoygovinda mandap\(^2\). The differentiation in the Raas Leela of Govindaji temple, Bijoygovinda and local Raas Leela is mainly to give status, honour and respect to the palatial culture.

According to Manipuri traditions, the scholars have divided the Manipuri Raas into five kinds, each performed by Lord Krishna and the Gopis according to the seasons. The performances or enactment of Raas Leela which depict the Krishna Brindavan leelas are observed in different seasons and it has become a part of the tradition of the Manipuri Vaishnavites. The five different types of Raas Leela are (i) **Maha Raas** (ii) **Kunja Raas** (iii) **Basant Raas** (iv) **Nitya Raas** and (v) **Diba Raas**. The creation of the first three Raas Leelas were by King Bheigyachandra (1763-1798). Later King Chandrakriti (1850-1886) after modifications developed the Nitya Raas, and lastly Diba Raas by King Churchand, which is the latest of all the types\(^3\). These five types of Raas Leelas are performed till today.

**Meaning**

Raas Leela is a Vaishnavite theatre form based on the legends of Radha Krishna with emphasis on *prem bhakti* or love and devotion. It comes within widely expected performance of Krishna leelas. Leela means the various events of the divine cowherd,
which includes Raas. Raas Leela is based on the sport or play of Lord Krishna along with the Gopis. It is a purely depiction of Radha Krishna prem leela or love plays. The Bhakti (devotion) and prem (love) of Bhagavata could be seen, felt and heard in the ritual theatre form of Raas Leela. The beginning and end of the leela is enclosed within the walls of Bhakti. The Raas Leela as such is a way or path that leads to the Lord and the fulfillment of eternal happiness of all the devotees. The performance and even the seeing and hearing of it is considered as a good karma or good deed. It is a medium of achieving salvation.

Bhagavata says that in Kaliyuga religion is Sankirtana and Raas Leela Sankirtana is set up as a Mahayagya (one of the greatest sacrifice). Raas Leela is thus not to excite or arouse the kama as few critics have emphasized. And particularly the Manipuri Raas Leela had undergone certain innovations like avoiding the depiction of the external theme involving the relationship of men and women. “The Raas Leela compositions one of a high literary order set to the classical music and performed to a given metrical cycle”.

Though the slokas are chanted from ‘Ras Panchadhyay’ based on ultimate love and oneness of Radha Krishna, the dance, gestures and abhinaya in the enactment of the plays does not signify any elements of Kama or carnal acts. It is such a form where the whole family members including elders, children etc, could pray and be a part of it.

Manipuri Raas Leela is a form of theatre which emerged from dedication, extraordinary thoughts, traditions and imaginations of creative gurus and royal patrons. The unique creation of King Bheigyachandra’s Raas Leela “is a sadhana, an initiation into yoga, an inward journey and represents a symbol, a mystery of love”. Raas Leela is a living tradition. Raas Leela is also an extension and illustration of Sankirtana music and dance. The soul of Manipuri Raas Leela lies in its traditional restraint, subdued movements and eloquent silence. A mere look, a slight movement of the head and even silence may indicate a world of meaning and expression.
Being an art born out of the soil, Manipur dance which achieves classicism through the ages retains still the abstract magical quality associated with the Lai Haraoba tradition\(^8\). The Raas Leela succeeds in transcending the real world to a celestial one in which hidden faces penetrate to such a level where the mind is raised to a stage of aesthetic consciousness. The Raas Leela tradition is performed to please the lord, enacting the divine play of Lord with the Gopis. The music, dance, dialogue and poses are developed in consonance with the divine sport. it enlightens the audiences to shed ego, pride and kama Bhava in reaching lord and for the blissful attainment of the Lord by the human soul.

Source

As clearly mentioned, the content of the Manipuri Raas Leela is from the Hindu and Puranic texts. The Harivamsa Purana and Bhagavata purana are the prominent texts that described the Raas episode and Raas Leela performance. Srimad Bhagavata is one of the most important sources of Raas Leela\(^9\). King Bheigyachandra established Nata Sankirtana as purvaranga of the three main Raas Leelas. It is believed that the scholars of those days had checked the sources of Srimad Bhagavata, Brahma Bebarta Purana, Govinda leelamrita, Sri Krishna leelamrita, Geet Govinda, Pad Kalpatram, Vaishnav Padvali\(^10\). The life experiences, events and leelas of Lord Krishna were clearly seen in the work of Srimad Bhagavata. According to Srimad Bhagavata the Raas Leela was performed in Nibhut Nikunj on the full moon day of Kartika by Sri Krishna with the Gopis, as a fulfillment of the wish of the Gopis of the katyani puja offered to the lord to get Krishna as their husband\(^11\).

The concept of Raas Leela became widespread in which the performance vary especially in the form and structure in different regional languages. Regional colouring and innovations are clearly visible if a general comparative analysis is studied. The Raas Leela of Manipur had taken the essence from varied texts which in performance bring
out the unique piece of art. The character of Radha is not mentioned in Vishnu Purana and Bhagavat Purana. It is more of a Raas Leela played by Lord and Gopis. But in Srimad Bhagavata a fortunate Gopi who played leela secretly with Lord Krishna is mentioned. The Krishna Gopi Raas Leela developed into Radha Krishna Raas Leela. As a result the essence of Raas Leela is shown vividly in the performance context. One of the most important sources of Ras Leela apart from Srimad Bhagavata is Geet Govind of Jaidev. The major contribution of Jaidev in Radha Krishna leela is the depiction of Smt. Radhika as the central character. The text is basically the glorification of the oneness and the divine love of Radha Krishna.

It had been the efforts of various ojas or teachers of songs and dances to compose such leelas in the form of dance drama, where dialogue assumes a secondary importance. Krishna myths and legends through ages had inspired many great men and is one of the subject matter experienced in their performing art forms. The development of Lord Krishna cult had a certain amount of impact on the growth of Indian art, literature and culture. It gave impetus not only to the literature, paintings etc, but also to theatrical representation. As such, the visual representation of Krishna’s divine stories involving the major theatrical elements like dance, music, song and dialogue became a part and parcel of the rituals of Krishna cult which define the importance of theatrical arts as it turned out to be the best medium for the preparation of faith among the masses.

Puranas, Bhasa, Patanjali, Natya Darpana, etc. heralded an era of Krishna plays and theatre up to 11th century A.D. Krishna poetry in various languages emerged in India from 12th century A.D. One such poet who stupendously influenced the Krishna theatre through the work of Geet Govinda was Jaidev. This wave further motivated the works of Chaitanya and Sankaradeva in Eastern and North-eastern India. Their efforts led to the composition and representation of Krishna poetry in lyrics, kritans and music. Sri Chaitanya Dev’s (1485-1534) Kritans and Krishna leelas bore the impressions of Jaidev’s works. Sankara (1449-1568) developed Vaishnav drama based on Krishna life. In his Vaishnav drama
there is no place for Smt. Radhika. Krishna leela progress to a new trend at Mathura and Brindavan. A kind of Krishna Nata called as Krishnaattam developed at Kerala. So numerous dance, songs, drama, theatre etc related to Krishna life cycle was performed in various regions of India in different forms.

In Manipur, Raas Leela tradition flourished under the patronage of the kings in palace. It was initiated by the efforts of the court giving a modified form and structure. In fact what we see in Manipuri Raas Leela is the elaborate reflection of the theatrical tradition, further modified to suit the regional taste. Throughout India till 18th century various Krishna Natya and Krishna leelas progressed speedily. Even today, the form of Krishna theatre is performed both as a classical traditional art and Lok Natya commonly widespread all over India.

**Raas Leela as a court theatre**

Though the content of the Raas Leela of Manipur is based on either of the Vaishnav text, it is identified as a distinctive Raas Leela form, and quite different from the Brindavan or Gujarati Raas Leela. The art form is a new product well designed and created. The content of the Ras Panchadhyay is summarized and rewritten flawlessly as a performance based ritual theatre. It succeeds in separating the true identity of the characters involved in the Raas Leela in various events. Each actors or actress perform the assigned role and duties. The anonymous fortunate Gopi as depicted is represented and identified in Manipur’s Maha Raas Leela as Smt. Radhika. The form, structure and content of the Raas Leela facilitate the devotional and emotional content.

The story line of the leela is articulated and designed with well characterized central and sub plots that conveys the essence, philosophy or goals set up by the Gurus. The presentation of the text and its content is tackled and further made easy by the service of Sutra singing. The placement of the character Sutra within the Raas Leela framework
practically removed the question of a long detailed text. The Sutra enables the audience to understand the story line and as the situation demands brief a long sequence or interlink the end with the beginning of a new episode. With all these intricate developments the Manipuri Raas Leela had acquired the status of a classical dance of India.

The royal ladies or Sons and daughters and grandsons pick up the roles of Krishna, Radha, Makokchingbi or the lead Gopi in the performance hosted by royal court. In Manipur there is the tradition of the queens, princess and royal ladies participating in the various Raas Leela held at Royal Palace. The graceful body movements and costumes, facial expression etc are controlled. Direct eye to eye contact with the audience is avoided. The lower body movements are minimized and there are restrictions even in the movements of the hands and upper body parts. All these factors however delved a rich aesthetic value of the Manipuri Raas Leela.

A brief introduction and performance structure of the Raas Leela are necessary to beget a clear understanding of the theatre forms. In Manipur, Maha Raas is performed in Kartik or hiyangei purnima (November). It is the full moon night which also coincides with one of the local festival of Mera Waphukpa. Maha Raas is performed in the same order or sequence as mentioned in Srimad Bahgavata’s Ras Panchayadhyay. It refers to the five chapters of the 10th canto of the Srimad Bhagavata - chapters XXIV, XXX, XXXI, XXXII and XXXIII. The texts are choreographed with the providing of the dramatic content further translated into songs and dance idioms bringing out the emotions, sentiments and subtle acting. It enacts all the five chapters of the text using songs, dances and drumbeats as the means of communication. Normally the slokas and songs of the Sutradhari are based on the Ras Panchadhyay.

The Raas Leela normally last the whole night. It begins with Nata pala Sankirtana around 8:00 P.M. and continues the whole night till 3:00 A.M. the next day’s early morning. The Raas Leela follows pre-determined chrome or order. A brief review of the sequence
or chrome of the five Raas Leelas signify certain differences in the meaning, essence and rules but the overall structure is almost similar. The theatrical performance structure entirely follows the codes of Srimad Bhagavata’s Ras Panchadhyay. The systematic study and close observation of Maha Raas Leela will further accentuated the principle features of Raas Leela and how the other forms mainly local ones incorporated or deviated from Govindajee Mandap performances.

**Nata Sankirtana as Purvaranga**

In any Raas Leela performances both at Govindajee Mandap and other local Mandaps, Nata Sankirtana is a must and begins as a purvaranga before the actual Raas Leela because Raas Leela is a part of Nata Sankirtana. It is necessary to first evoke Sri Chaitanya, incarnated in Kali yug as the sambhog of Lord Krishna and Radhika to fulfill the three promises of Lord Krishna. Chaitanya’s great love of Radha and Krishna and his longing to view or experience the divine union are emphasized in the songs. Sri Krishna’s Raas Leela with the Gopis in Brindavan is enacted through Goura Bhavi or Sri Chaitanya imagination.

In Nata Sankirtana too, the Brindavan leela is depicted through Goura Bhavi. Therefore, the Manipuri Vaishnav prepares Raas Leela through Goura Bhavi with an attempt to enable the audience to experience the emotions and sentiments as performed by Gouranga in his imaginations. The audiences view Raas Leela not as a form of stage show nor a kind of entertainment. There is a ritualistic aura that determines it as a complete form of worship. It is identified as self-surrender to the union of Krishna and Smt. Radhika. Raas Leela thus is inseparable from Nata Sankirtana and the essence of Raas Leela prevails within the contours of Nata Sankirtana. As a proper sequence of Manipuri Vaishnav beliefs, Raas Leela is held within the Nata Sankirtana performance as a means to attain salvation in Kali Yug.
The Nipa pala or the Nata Sankirtana preludes the Raas Leela as purvaranga. It starts from Raga houba to Gouranga Bhavi till Krishna rup. The Nata Sankirtana as a purvaranga of Raas Leela is the most distinctive form of Manipuri Raas Leela. This is not found in the original Ras Panchadhyay text or elsewhere. The main body of Raas Leela is followed by the songs presentation of Sutradharsi after the end of the Nata Sankirtana Pala.

Therefore, Raas Leela is an extension of Nata Sankirtana. It visualizes the Lord Sri Krishna leelas shown in the form of dance, music, dialogue etc. as seen or imagined through the eyes of Lord Gouranga. The leelas seen in Gouranga’s imagination is further structured and visualized in the concrete form of Raas Leela performance. So, the Nata Sankirtana with Raga alaap, Eshei raga, Gopi vandana, till Brindavan Bhava create the right atmosphere and environment in developing the appropriate context of Raas Leela performance. The usage of such innovative techniques led to the creation of a refined Raas Leela performance structure. It is also apt to discuss the performance structure of Maha Raas Leela being one of the most important forms. The study and analysis reveals the potent theatrical dynamics and interplay in the Raas Leela.

Maha Raas Leela

Of all the five kinds of Raas Leelas, Maha Raas is considered as the most important. It was first offered to Lord Govindajee by king Bheigyachandra on the day of Lord Govindajee’s consecration at the Langthabal palace. It was believed to be performed for five consecutive days. Maha Raas Leela began on full moon and ended on the fifth day which is auspicious or laicha aphaba. This is in celebration of lord Krishna’s fulfillment of the wishes of the Gopis. In the first ever Raas performance at Langthabal, Ngombram Sai performed lead singer or Esheihanba of nipa pala, Sridharsai (uncle of king Bheigyachandra) as second lead singer or duhar, king Bheigyachandra as lead drum player, etc. in the Nata Sankirtana Purvaranga episode pala. Maharani Harimati played the role of Raas makokchingbi or lead Gopi, princess Bimbavati as Radha (or
Rasheshwari), taught by Kabokhubomba and other royal ladies participated as Gopis. In the earlier days Maha Raas is performed only at Sri Govindaji and Sri Bijoygovinda mandaps. Nowadays Maha Raas Leela is performed on the same day i.e. Mera waphukpa at Govindaji Mandap, Bijoygovinda Mandap and even at local mandaps.

The intrinsic essence of Maha Raas Leela is imparting the lesson of Bhakti and true love as a means to reach Lord Krishna. It is also an experience of self-realization of the Gopis who took pride in their love and affection to Lord Krishna. The Gopis started thinking Lord Krishna as their own Lord. When Lord Krishna realized the pride and jealousy in their hearts, he vanished with Radhika. As Radhika also developed the same feeling, Lord Krishna left her all alone in the forest and suddenly disappeared. The pang of separation somehow made all the Gopis including Radhika suffer in grief and searched for Lord Krishna in the deep and dark forest without any fear and inhibitions. It is a test of how far the Gopis sincerely loved and worshipped Krishna. So, Maha Raas Leela highlights the way to worship Lord with sincerity, faith and purity of heart – as Sri Krishna left all of them the moment their heart became selfish and impure. The discourse on Maha Raas, here, has been abridged, as it will be dealt in detail while discussing the performance structure of the Raas Leela as whole.

Kunja Raas Leela

It is like a shortened or abridged form of Maha Raas Leela, which is called Kunja Raas leela, as it was originally performed in the ‘Kunja’. Kunja Raas is performed on the full moon day of Asvin or Mera (October-november) on the night of Mera Wayungba. It is based on ‘Govinda Leelamrita’ though there are differences in the sequence of the ‘Abhisar’ episodes. Kunja Raas can be considered as a part of Maha Raas Leela as it does not enact the complete text of Ras Panchadhyay but attain an equally important form in the Govindaji circle. It is the depiction of the daily play of Lord Krishna, Smt. Radhika and Gopis in the beautiful Kunja adorned with leaves, flowers and birds. The
basic composition of Kunja Raas Leela performance structure is Gopi abhisar, Brindavan Varnan, Bhangi pareng, Rup varnan, prathana, Pushpanjali and ends with Kunja arati.

With due completion of purvaranga, performed by Nata Sankirtana pala the Kunja Raas begins with Lord Krishna’s journey to Kunja. He plays the flute calling all the Gopis to begin the leela. The two flutists on the left of the Sutras give the playback music of the flute for the young child actor enacting as Lord Krishna. The Gopis hear the sweet sound of Lord’s flute and become restless. They run towards the Kunja. Gopi abhisar is performed. Mandali Sajan is enacted as sutras present the songs from the texts and padavalis. Gopis sing the first line of the text and is repeated again by the sutras. As the Kunja Raas Leela progresses, the essential backbone of the play ‘Achouba Bhangi pareng’ is danced out. In local performance there is Krishna Narton and Radha Narton (individual dance items of Krishna and Radha). Graceful Chali dance movements are performed. The Gopis offer flowers at the feet of Lord Krishna and Smt. Radhika in the Pushpanjali episode. Finally the Pujari or priest offer aarati (tray of fire) and all the audiences stand up and participate in reciting, ‘hari bol hari bol’.

**Basanta Raas Leela**

This type of Raas Leela is offered on the full moon night of *Chaitra Baisakh* (spring) or *Sajibu purnima* (March-April). It is based on Brahmabebenta puranas and Jaidev’s *Geet Govinda*. Basanta Raas even enacts part of Srimad Bhagavata though certain episodes are omitted and substituted with the additions from Jaidev’s *Geet Govinda*. This episode is about Lord Krishna’s dalliance with Chandrabali, Radha’s anger and Krishna’s attempt to appease her. “It coincides with the spring season and to commemorate the re-approchement between Krishna and Radha after a painful separation”23. However there is a shift or change in the season. Instead of the *phalgun purnima*, i.e. Holi, King Bheigyachandra offered the Sri Krishna leela on Chaitra purnima or Sajibu (April) in the form of Basanta Raas. The Holi khel/Phalgun khel to be performed
on the Phalgun purnima is adjusted on Sajibu Purnima (Chaitra). Certain adjustments were made and included both the Radhika Maan and *Aber Khel* (play with colours) or Phalgun Khel in Basanta Raas Leela played together by Krishna and Radha, Chandrabali and Gopis.

The Nata Sankirtana Pala performance begins as purvaranga and concludes with Brindavan Varnan through Gouranga Bhavi. The Rasdhari begins the drum or pung raga that commences the actual performance of Raas Leela. Sutradhari continues the alap Vrindavan Varnan, Krishna abhisar and Gopis abhisar songs. The Sakhis or Gopis perform Mandali Sajan or decorating the mandali and perform Rupa Varan. The main dance forms like Jagoi Mapop, Bhangi achouba pareng, Krishna Narton, Radha Narton etc. are performed. *Aberkhel* or the game of throwing and putting colours on each other is enacted. Gopis hold *dona* (container made of plantain leaf) full of *aber* (vermillion colours) with flowers. It is considered as one of the important sequence of Basanta Raas. Both the Sutras and Gopis will sing turn by turn.

In one of the dramatic plot, Krishna showers his love for Chandrabali (refered as a rival of Radha) and dance with her joyfully. It hurts the sentiments of Radha. She immediately enacts the pain by leaving the Raas mandal in humiliation and resentment. The Raas Leela performance then develops into Smt. Radhika maan or silence of Radha. The Gopis (mainly Visakha and Lalita) are restless and experience anxiety in their hearts. Lord Krishna realizes his mistake. He looks around here and there for Radha. He asks for forgiveness. Radha takes time to be convinced by Krishna. Finally Radhika forgives him and participates in the Raas Leela. The Gopis being pleased serve the deities with flowers and betel nuts. Khurumba Bhangi pareng is performed and the Gopis offer pushpanjali. At the end, the priest offers yugal (paired Krishna and Radha) aarati.
Nitya Raas Leela (Nartan Raas)

It was created with the court support of King Chandrakirti by the gurus fulfilling the essence of Lord Krishna leelas. There are no strict codifications regarding the fixed season or specific day as such. It can be performed on any day. “Nitya Raas is generally performed throughout the year except on Sharat (autumn) and Basanta (spring) months.”

It is a similar version of Niti leela and large portion of the content is based on Govinda leelamrita. In Brindavan, it was played in Nribhut Nikunj. Nitya Raas depicts the Niti leela and divine sport of Radha and Krishna expressed through melodious songs and dances.

Like Basanta Raas, Kunja Raas and Maha Raas, Nitya Raas Leela also begins with Nata Sankirtana Pala as the purvaranga. With the beginning of punglon or drum beats raga by Raasdhari the Sutra starts the Raga alap, Brindavan Vaman, Krishna abhisar, Radha abhisar, one after another. A special addition of Brinda thokpa episode or Brinda utti is enacted.

In a later addition a dance sequence of Brinda Devi depicting her journey to Lord Krishna to narrate the woes of Radhika is performed. A dialogue between Brinda and Tulsi further highlights the theatrical presence. The Sutra narrates Smt. Radha dressing up in the ‘Veshsajan’ episode. The Gopis abhisar is performed by the Gopis with elegant body gestures and movements. Then, the Gopis come out in a single file in chali rhythm and performs Bhangi Achouba gracefully to the songs of Sutra. In the Krishna Narton (individual dance performance), Lord Krishna performs cartwheel sequence followed by Radha Narton. The Gopis dance together with Smt. Radhika and there is another sequence of dance by the lead Gopi. Bhangi Khurumba pareng is performed which progresses to Sambhog or union. The Gopis offer Prathana and puspanjali to Radha Krishna. It finally concludes with aarati offered by the priest.
Diba Raas Leela

The Diba Raas Leela is performed mainly in day time irrespective of seasons. Normally both Nitya and Diba Raas are not performed at the palace or Lord Govindaji temple. Diba Raas Leela is created by Akham oja Tomba during King Churchand reign in the year 1940. The first Diba Raas performance was at Hidungmayum Mandap, Sagolband. Akham oja Tomba was helped by Nityapad Sana, oja Samanduram, Nongmaithem Chagei, oja Aheibam Thambon etc. The Diba Raas as the name suggest is performed in the afternoon. It is the depiction of Radhika’s arrival at Sri Krishna Radhakunja. Both Radha and Krishna met and proceed to North-west direction to Ambhuj Kunja and performed Diba Raas Leela. The idea behind the creation of Diba Raas Leela is to give an opportunity to the Vaishnav Bhaktas to offer Bhakti and prayer at the convenient day time through out the season as the three important Raas Leela viz, Maha Raas Leela, Kunja Raas Leela and Basanta Raas Leela are season and time specific. It is based on Govinda leela Nritya and Ras panchadhayay.

Diba Raas Leela begins with Nata Sankirtana pala as purvaranga. The usual Raga alaap, Guru vandana, Vaishnav Vandana etc. are preformed and Goura Bhavi by sutra. The Krishna dance abhisar is enacted performed and Lord shed tears in Radha’s thoughts. He sought help of Subol (no physical presence). Krishna plays his flute. Songs and dances are presented showing Radha abhisar, Veshsajan and Gopi abhisar. The Gopis and Radha arrive at Ambhuj kunja to start the Raas Leela. Radha, Krishna and Ananga Manjuri dance together. A series of dance are performed followed by Bhangi achouba, Krishna Narton, Radha narton, Ananga Manjuri Narton, Aber khel, prathna, sambhog, swadhin, prathna and gopis offering pushpanjali.

Of the five kinds, the first three important Raas Leela viz, Maha Raas Leela, Kunja Raas and Basanta Raas Leela are traditionally performed in selected temples on specific days, fulfilling all the codes and norms (as laid down by the court or concerned
institutions and authorities). Sri Govindaji since king Bheigyachandra is believed to witness the Raas Leelas tradition. Raas Leela is even organized by local groups in the mandaps attached to temples at many local areas. The later two Raas Leelas Nitya Raas Leela and Diba Raas are common more at a local level and are not allowed to perform in Govindajee temple. As such the performance of Nitya Raas Leela and Diba Raas Leela show deviation in the chrome or structure from Srimad Bhagavata and local songs and independent dance sequences are introduced.

The Raas Leelas as mentioned before are further categorized as Raas Leela performance of Sri Govindaji temple, Raas Leela of Sri Bijoygovindaji temple and lastly for local temples or mandaps. In the Sri Govindaji Raas Leela performances, there are no actors playing the role of Radha and Krishna. For the Govindaji, the statue or idols of Rasheshwari Govinda are taken out from the temple and placed at the centre of the Raas Mandal (performing space), on a revolving platform known as Chakrapith, which was made especially for the Raas Leela. In such Raas Leela performances the Rasheshwari Govinda idols are taken as the real divine deities by the Gopis. The Gopis in the Raas Leela communicate with the idols through dialogue, songs and by dancing around them. The absence of the actors taking the role of Krishna and Radha makes it difficult to depict certain episodes like Krishna abhisar and Radha abhisar. As the performance progresses the revolving platform is turned slowly. But in the Bijoygovinda Raas Leela, the main protagonist roles of Radha and Krishna are performed by very young actors. As such the sequence of Radha and Krishna abhishars are shown explicitly. The Raas Leela performances in the local level or villages are similar to that of Sri Bijoygovinda Raas with the presence of Radha abhishar and Krishna abhishar.
Theatrical elements of Raas Leela

The Performance Space

Raas Leela is performed in the Mandap attached to a temple. In local areas in absence of Mandap, temporary mandap is set up or erected. The Mandap as such is constructed with great care fulfilling the required rules, as it signifies the holy place where the divine sport of Krishna and Gopis is to be performed. The exact performance space of the Raas Leela is known as Raas Mandal. Raas Mandali is the central space of the Mandap where the exact performance takes place.

The type of the Raas Mandal varies from text to text. In the Brindavan Bhava the main playing space was centered around the dense forest of Brindavan where a crescent shape platform with abundant sweet smelling flowers, creepers and flower-buds all around is shaped for the divine sport. The present day Raas mandal is somewhat created to resemble as mentioned in the Puranas with artistic specified effects. The Raas Mandal of Manipur Raas Leela does not necessarily adopt the crescent shape form of Brindavan Raas Leela. It is slightly roundish. The Raas Mandal is constructed, designed and decorated to have a realistic resemblance of the settings of Brindavan’s Raas Leela sport.

Arrangement of Raas Mandal

The decoration of the Raas mandal is time consuming. Thus, it begins few days prior to the performance day. The mandal is cleaned and decorated. Instances of two types of Raas mandal beautification are seen. The main eight pillars (or 12 pillars) of the Raas Mandal are either wrapped with white clothes or with leaves (especially jackfruit tree or peepal). The ceiling is first covered with yenphak which is a mat, made of Bamboo strips crossing one another or at times simply with plain white cloth. At present, movable
The natural environment of the typical Raas Mandal is created with inputs of creepers, artificial birds (parrots mainly) flowers, branches, etc. In the past a real parrot is kept in the Raas Mandal. The parrot serves as a small bird playing character in one of the scenes when the bird replies to Sri Krishna’s queries about the whereabouts of Radha. A dol (swing) which is required in the Raas Leela performance is kept attached to the ceiling and at the right sequence it is put down. The whole beauty of the Raas Leela is also enhanced with the throwing down of flowers and petals from the ceiling in sequences like aarati, prathana and yugal aarati. A helper is engaged in arranging and dropping down the essentials from the ceiling during the performance. All the decorations are made in such a way that it should not obstruct the audience view. The realistic representation is further attempted with dropping of peacock, birds, etc. as the development or intensification of the plot demands. Women and young girls participate in making flower garlands for Raas Leela.

In the past lighting is normally with big oil lamps. Nowadays, lighting generally comprises of bulbs and tube lights. Straw mats are spread out in rows in all the directions surrounding the Raas Mandal for the audience. Once the preliminaries and beautification of the Raas Mandal is over, it is considered or taken as Brindavan’s Nikunja forest. The Raas Mandal is pure and sacred and prohibits entering it. The Vaishnav devotees identify it with the real performing space of Krishna and Radhika.

**Space Organization**

The four cardinal directions are marked by four entrance or four symbolic doors to the Raas Mandal. The Krishna shariya is on the south of the Raas Mandal. The Gopis are on the western side. The southern door is reserved for the Lord Krishna’s entrance and Radhika entrance is from the western side. In the corner of the northwest near the Raas
Raas leela: Performance space and visual display of the dance enactment.

Figure 6. (i)
Mandal the Raasdhari (Guru), Sutradhari (female lead singer), pungyeiba (drummers), moibung khongba (conch blower), flutist are seated. In the eastern side the Jagoi Ngakpa or protector of Raas Leela is seated. The audience will sit around the mandal. The position and seat of the performers are specific. A small Montek or coloured thick cushion of velvet is kept to mark Sri Krishna’s seat or Asan.

There is another theatrical aspect about the performance space. Raas Mandal according to the content/context of the story line is imagined differently. In the sequence performance like Krishna abhisar, Radha abhisar, Brinda Sakhi playing the Makok chingbi role etc are performed in the same performance area but symbolically connoting separate space. In Krishna abhisar, Raas Mandal is taken as enroute to Nikunjan likewise in Radha abhisar, the journey from Radha’s residence to Kunja and so on. From time to time the performance space is developed in different context in accordance to the situations of different role playing characters. The ordinary Mandap in the process is transformed into Brindavan.

**Dress**

The costume of the Manipuri Raas Leela is perhaps the most extraordinary feature. It reveals the innovative, artistry and creativity of the people. There is costume for specific characters. The costume of Raas Leela as such is not to create a visual effect. The form of the attire, the colour, symbols and motifs designed have its own meaning and underlying relationship with the concerned characters. There is a myth of the evolution of Raas Leela costume in one of the dreams of king Bheigyachandra. But a close examination suggests the similarities and possible outcome from the dress of the pre-Hindu Lai Haraoba. A potloi setpa or professionals who are engaged in the making and dressing up of the attires are hired by the Rashdhari for dressing up the actors.
Krishna

The costume of Lord Sri Krishna is known as ‘Natvar Vesh’. The pheijom or dhoti is of silk, golden in colour with studded sequins. Kunja or the frontal fold pleats of the pheijom is put down. Khaons or decorated flaps cross on the left and right shoulders and hang down from the waist area on both sides slightly below the knee. The upper part is worked with bright and shining sequins, mirrors etc. Tungyan or a piece of ornamented costume is worn to cover the back. The kwangchet or waist band is worn around the waist for the convenience and comfort while dancing. The kwangchet is decorated with kwangnap or border decoration. The headgear or crown is adorned with ornaments, peacock chura (a piece spread out like a fan embedded with silver and peacock feathers) inserted in the upper portion of the gear called chirong. A portion of the headgear also covers the earlope known as nakhum. A churie or shamjee either of plastic or paper into fine simple decorative piece is attached to the head gear. After the head gear is worn, kajenglei (a traditional tiara) or a crown is put. The bare chest is covered with pisindrai mari, a gold necklace. The wrist, hand, forearm, feet, leg, etc. are decorated with bracelets, rings, anklets, necklaces, wrist and arm bands or armlet for e.g. Pambom phabi on forearm and pambom yai on lower forearm, are used either of gold or brass. Chandan tilak or sandal paste mark is put on twelve body parts of Lord Krishna. Krishna’s flute is beautified with bright beautiful flowers. The potloi setpa follows the rules of dressing Krishna from the toe and go slowly up to the head.

Radha and Gopis

Radha and Gopis wear potloi. It is worn around the waist and hangs down reaching the ankle nearly touching the ground. Potloi is also known as Kumir. It is decorated with sequins, mirrors, gold appliqué, brass and silver coloured stripes forming distinct patterns. The potloi of Smt. Radhika and Chandrabali is green in colour and red in case of the Gopis. Poshwan made of bright silver zari giving shining gaze with mirror works is worn around the waist on top of the potloi. The poshwan falling into large waves around enhances the beauty of the potloi. A waist band with kwangnap or border is
worn. They wear half sleeve velvet blouse mostly of green colour. The sexual appeal of the women is minimized. The original koktumbi style (conical veil) is modified by Chandrakirti in Nitya Raas without the conical veil or koktumbi as jhapa or khurak paibi. The hair is held up and covered with koktumbi (a hair style) and their head and faces covered with maikhum a thin veil in shining and glittering cone shaped head dress. A white cloth called thabakyet is wrapped around the breast. The costume of Raas Leela enlivens the divine and spiritual aspect of the performance while suppressing and undermining the human passion. After dressing up the Brahmin perform the Ghot puja and purify them from all sins. They are totally cleansed and almost ready to enter the world of Lord Krishna. Abhisek is performed and all the actors now identified with a particular character proceed to the Raas mandal. They are considered sacred and cannot be touched by the ordinary people.

Actors

Many actors are required for the roles of Krishna, Radha and Gopis. The Sutra singers and music orchestra are also important for the enactment. The major characters of the Raas Leela are Sri Krishna, Smt. Radhika and Makokchingbi. The right age of Krishna and Radha is below ten years. The character of Radha is portrayed by a young girl to fulfill the aspirations of the Bhakti sadhana. It also removed the concept of ‘Kama’. As such the devotees derive satisfaction and pleasure from the enactment of the divine sport of Sri Krishna and Smt. Radhika by innocent children. They absorb or taste the rasa of the Raas Leela with complete bhakti. Regarding the Gopis, there is no specific fixation of age.

Experienced professional artistes enact the roles of the Gopis. The most important lead Gopi or Makok chingbi, Mathang chatpi (second lead Gopi), etc are usually played by the members of the families involved in the offering of the Raas Leela. However professional actors enact such roles too. The portrayal of other Gopis can either be by
professional performers or by new students\textsuperscript{36}. There is a belief among the people considering the young children to be fortunate if the role of Krishna and Gopi are enacted at least in a life time.

Therefore the possibility of unsynchronized dance movements due to lack of professional children performance in the mandap Raas Leela performance is quite high. In-spite of such drawbacks due to lack of skills, audience go and become a part of the Raas Leela for their only motive is not only to view the Raas Leela but to worship it. In the stage Raas Leela performances (mainly shown in cultural shows), all the characters are performed by experts and professionals.

**Role of Raasdhari**

Raasdhari, the Guru or the director, plays an important role in the performance of the Raas Leela. He teaches Raas Leela to the actors. It is quite important for the Raasdhari to prepare the Raas Leela structure abiding the codes. The Raasdhari needs to be sincere and faithful to his work. He as the Guru during the training of the young actors follows certain ritualistic observations for the success of the Raas Leela performance.

**Role of Sutradhari**

Sutradhari is the lead singer who plays an important role in the Raas Leela. She is assisted by two or three assistants. The female singers hold a pair of Mandila which is a smaller kind of cymbal. ‘Sutra’ means thread and ‘Dhari’ meaning to hold. So the term Sutradhari depicts the one who holds or controls the thread or the soul of Raas Leela. The sutra contributes a lot in the song, narration and in linking up the sequences of the story line or intensification of the major and minor plots. The Sutradhari should wear the traditional attire in the performance. He or she should possess certain characters like love, devotion, truthfulness to the Lord and a great lover of art\textsuperscript{37}. The sole duty of Sutra is to chant the
Harinam. Most of the songs in Raas Leela are performed by Sutra. The Gopis can sing either solo or in chorus with the Sutra using the symbolic gestures and movements. In some episodes the main characters also performed lip service to the songs and narration of Sutradhari.

Role of Arangpham and Mandap Mapu

In the Raas Leela, the Arangpham is responsible to arrange the essential materials for the rituals involved. He is seated in the mandap's *koubru laiji* side (north-west). Mandap’s South-west is reserved for Mandap Mapu or lord of the Mandap. Arangpham shares the responsibility of organizing the needs of the performance.

In most of the traditional performances, an honoured and respected man is assigned as ‘Jagoi Ngakpa’ or the protector of the performance. But in the presence of the king, there is absence of Jagoi Ngakpa as he being the supreme authority is responsible for the success of the Raas Leela. In local areas the appointment of Jagoi ngakpa is prevalent. His main duty is to see that there are no untoward incidents and disturbances in the smooth progress of the Raas Leela. His seat is reserved in the central area of the Eastern boundary of the Raas mandal. All of them are dressed up in the traditional Manipuri attire. The menfolk wear *pheijom* or dhoti, *kokyet* (turban) and women wear *phanek* with *innafi*.

Musical instruments/musicians

The orchestra of Manipuri Raas Leela consists of drummer, flutist, conch shell blower and esraj (stringed instrument) player. The orchestra occupies the northwest corner of the Raas Mandal. The ideal length of the flute is taken to be 1 feet 10.5 inches and a width of 3.5 inches. There are seven holes, of which six holes are of one inch gap and the seventh hole is of ten inch difference. They are mostly made from bamboo (mainly
It is believed that flute was first used during the Raas Leela of King Chuchand by oja Raj Gopeshwar Singh. Flute is used maximum during the sequence of Bhangi pareng. This is a flute recital known as *Murali Nad* in the Raas Leela. The role of drummer is performed by the Guru or Rashdhari of the Raas Leela. He is assisted by another drummer. The orchestra's vitality may differ from performance to performance and their sole duty is to provide the background music to the enactment of Raas Leela.

Conchshell is auspicious in the Raas Leela. The conch blower places a pair of conch in front of him and blows at the Nata pala Sankirtana during the beginning, intervals and at the end of the pala. The conch is also blown at the *Raga houba* (melodies of fixed notes) of the Raas Leela during the entry of Krishna, Gopi abhisar and at other episodes of the Raas Leela. Finally, the conch music is played at the end part of the Raas Leela during the offering of aarati.

**Orchestra Seating**

In the North-west corner of the Raas mandal, the Guru or Raasdhari of the Raas Leela along with his assistant drummer occupy the seats facing east. To the right of the assistant drummer the Moibung Khongba is seated. The Sutradhari is on the corner facing south and the seats to her left are taken by the assistant singers and the flutist. The remaining musicians of the orchestra group sit to the left side of the Sutradhari. Coordination of the orchestra, musicians is important especially the sutradhari and the flutist in the Bhangi pareng sequence.

**Seating arrangements for audience**

There is specific code of conduct to be followed in making the seating arrangements for the audience. In case of the Raas Leela at Sri Govindaji Raas Mandal, the central
area of the southern side is reserved for the king and other nobles and higher dignitaries of the state. The Northern area is for men and the western half for the ladies. The seating arrangements are further classified for both men and women according to their status and ranks. The seat of the queen is reserved behind the Raasdhari. However at local Mandap arrangements of seats somewhat vary according to the presence of the royal dignitaries and state authorities.

The audiences consist of nobles, elderly men and women, nobles, vaishnav devotees, pandits and young children. They are not allowed to enter the mandap with their shoes. They have to leave them aside before entering the mandap. The audiences witness the performance from dusk till dawn. They cry, pray and enjoy the Rasas or sentiments of the Raas Leela. They identify the actors as real and take the dust of the feet of these actors as pure and sacred. The audiences forget the real world and plunged into the sea of the spiritual world. The entrant salutes by bowing to the gathering before taking the seat, the seated audiences return the salutations with respect and courtesy. Such mutual exchanges of salutations are common in any traditional ritual oriented gathering. The idea connotes the presence of the Lord in the audience. Women wear pungou phanek (white pink sarong) and thin white innafi (shawl) while men put pheijom or dhoti. All of them put sandal paste in their forehead. The audiences while witnessing the progress of the Raas Leela experience a strong urge for direct communication with the Lord and identify themselves as one of the Gopis. Their ecstatic experience transcends the physical reality.

Preliminaries of Raas Leela

Raas Leela’s association with rituals encompasses numerous ritual preliminaries and perfections prior to the actual performance. An auspicious timing is fixed on specific days according to Lunar Calender. The Guru or Raasdhari teaches the boys and girls to perform before the Lord. All the actors of the Raas Leela abstain from fish or non-
vegetarian food during the training and performance period as a mark of ritual observance. The Raasdhari and the actors offer puja before the actual commencement and pray to the Lord to seek blessings. The Raasdhari blesses all the performers to enact their role well. It is performed in the seasonal festivals of Govindaji by the royal directives and commoners who can afford the cost of arranging Raas Leela for the spiritual welfare of their children. The Raas Leela performance in most cases is postponed if any member involved in the Raas Leela is yum mangba (concept of impure in the sagei or lineage due to death or birth) till yum sengba (purification after the completion of certain rites). Dressing up also begins with great care. Arrangements are made in advance of the Gopi Bhojan to be performed on the next day morning after Raas Leela performance. The preparation of Raas Leela is not less than a puja and is similar to a big yajna or sacrifice.

The beginning of imparting the lessons of Raas Leela to the actors portaying the roles of Krishna, Radha, lead Gopis and others begin with Ghot Puja (worship of pitcher - an auspicious rite) by the priest. During the learning process the actors visit religious sites on specific days to seek blessings. Just one day before the performance, the Arangpham first lay down the formal invitation to Sri Govindaji, then to Sutradhari with Boriba (consecration with offerings). The Gopis offer the formal invitation to Radha Krishna yugal (paired). Offering to Sanamahi is organized and the burning of lamp is not put off. All the guardian deities are appeased too. The actors observe ritual in their individual houses mostly to Sanamahi to enable them to perform the Raas Leela without any mistakes. The royal palace during monarchial rule from King Bheigyachandra onwards patronize the performers, scholars, Raasdhari, etc. associated with Raas Leela.

The officials of Sri Govindaji Temple Board nowadays organize the Raas Leela according to the changing calendrical cycle. But in local level, interested groups contribute money and appoint a Rashdhari or teacher to teach the children. A large sum of money is contributed by the families of Radha and Krishna actors. The training or teaching of
Raas Leela last from one and half month to two months. In many cases the main roles are performed by the inexperienced children whereas the lead Gopi and other Gopis are hired. The drummer, Sutradhari singer, orchestra group, potlopi setpi (dresser) and group for the preparation of the Raas mandal are professional artiste and paid.

The actors after dressing up are purified and enter the Mandap. The moment they are in Raas Mandal, they no longer represent their individual self but identified as the characters they are enacting. The Nata Sankirtanapala and the audience show Bhakti, offer prathnas, prostrate, touch their feets, as they are identified as the Lord and his consort Radhika. They weep for they imagined themselves as entering into a new realm of Lord Krishna and his consorts. This 'true Bhakti' is the essence and crux of Raas Leela.

**Performance structure: Maha Raas Leela**

Maha Raas Leela is all about shedding ego and pride. The Gopis experience sorrow with Lord Krishna antadhyan or disappearance due to their pride and selfishness. After making the Gopis suffer Lord Krishna reappear seeing their true love and devotion. He then dances with each Gopi known as 'Ek Gopi Ek Shyam', in the structure fulfilling one of the wishes of all the Gopis in Katyani Puja to have Lord Krishna for themselves. Both Bhangi pareng achouba and Brindavan pareng are danced out. ‘Ek Gopi Ek Shyam’ episode is not done in Govindajee temple mandap due to absence of Krishna and Radha abhisar.

The theatrical content in Maha Raas is very high. The Maha Raas begins with the ritual preliminaries of performing certain rituals. The Mandap mapu chants the Haridhwani and initiate to begin the Raas Leela. The Nipa Pala begins the purvaranga. The usual Nata Sankirtana chrome of Eshei Raga houba, alaap (delineation of the basic notes of the melody), abahon, Sri Gouranga Nirupon and Gouranga avtar are performed in the usual style and spirit. The Nata pala in their 'Astha Vesh' enter the Raas mandal and occupy their positions. Just like the Nata Sankirtana performance, the Nata Pala observe all the
Raas leela: Performance space and visual display of the dance enactment.
1. Krishna
2. Krishna abhisar (in the anticlockwise direction)
3. Krishna reaching Kunja and taking his position
4, 5, 6, & 7. Four gopis attending with chamar
8. Radha
9. Gopi makok Chingbi (identifying as Lalita sakhi)
10. Gopi Mathang chatpi (portraying the role of Vishakha)
11, 12, 13, .... Gopis participating in the Raas leela.

(iii)
The gopis along with radha proceeding towards Kunja to play Raas Leela with lord Krishna.

(iv) Prelude to Raas Leela
Radha takes centre stage with Makok Chingbi on right and Mathang Chatpi on left and honour lord krishna paying obeisance. The four gopis with the chamar stand besides lord Krishna. The other gopis take their respective position on the mandali.

(v) Initial worship
Yugal Murti (paired) of Radha and Krishna. Makok Chingbi and gopis offer aarati (burning of the cotton stick soaked in Ghee)

(vi) Position of the begining of Raas Leela
Krishna and Radha encircled by the gopis. Makok Chingbi leads the gopis and covdr the mandali by performing various dances in anticlockwise direction. The two central characters of the Raas leela dance within the circle.
expected norms of showing respect and honour to the space kept sacred for Lord by bowing and touching the ground. Such act of showering honour is shown even to the audiences. The Nata Pala after seeking blessings from their own musical instruments (either drums or cymbals) stand in the semi-circle pala position to begin the punglon raga by the two drummers. The lead singer sings the Brindavan Varnan through Gouranga Bhavi and concludes the Nata Sankirtana.

The Nata pala leave the Raas Mandal with the end of purvaranga for the main Raas Leela performance by handing the responsibilities to the Rasdhari. The Rasdhari, Sutradhari, flutist, conchs blower etc. offer phulchandan (flower & sandlepaste) and betel nuts to the idols. The Rasdhari begins the punglon Raga achouba (doublebeat). He initiates the main leela with the norms like eshei Raga, Guru Vandana, Sabha Vandana and Brindavan Vandana. Meanwhile the Sutradhari begins the raga after paying homage to the lord. The Sutradhari intervenes with chants showering the beauty of Brindavan as taken out from the Padavalis. In the Maha Raas Leela of Govindaji the slokas are directly chanted from the Ras Panchadhaya along with the conch music. A sacred spiritualistic environment is set.

In quick succession Brindavan Vaman and Vaishnav Vandana are performed. The Sutradhari recites ‘Bedarajanirubacha’ and ends with the last line of the third slokas of ‘Ras Panchadhyay’

Through the songs of Sutradhari a beautiful Sharat Purnima or full moon night is picturized that captivates the thought of Lord Krishna. The enchanting night inspires
him with a strong desire to play his flute for Raas Leela. Krishna in his Nata Vesh (full
costume) makes a dramatic entry in the Krishna abhisar episode. The journey to Kunja
is depicted by the narrative songs. Dance movements, gestures, symbolical
representations and the central plot of the leela to be enacted are highlighted in the
abhisar.

As soon as Lord Krishna reaches Kunja (depicted either by a swing or a tree in the
northern gate), he performs the Murali Nad or playing the flute. The child actor stands
in the Murali Nad pose though the exact music is being played by the flutist already
seated behind the Sutradhari. Hearing the sweet music of Krishna’s flute, all the Gopis
are restless to join Lord Krishna in the divine love sport of Raas Leela. The Gopis clad
in beautiful potlois along with the lead Gopi enters the mandal. Gopi abhisar or the journey
to Kunja is shown through graceful body movements in the slow rhythmic songs. In Ras
Panchadhayay, Gopis ran to Krishna’s place leaving behind their works on hearing the
melodious Murali Nad of Lord Krishna. These developments are recited by the Sutradhari
in the form of slokas four to ten or eleven (author varies) of Ras panchadhayay.43

The Gopis enter the space from the western entrance forming two files. The files are
led by Lalita and Bisakha. In Govindaji Mandap the Gopis enters and bow to the idols
and offer prayers. Then Radha abhisar is followed as shown with Smt. Radhika’s
restlessness and anticipation on hearing the sweet music of Lord’s Murali Nad. The
adornment and decoration of Smt. Radhika is depicted through melodious songs sung
by Sutradhari. Smt. Radhika is identified as the central character and visually depicted
her longingness to meet Lord Krishna, the sixteenth sloka is chanted.

Due to the representation by the idols, the slokas from seventeen to twenty-four of the
first chapter of Raas panchadhayay meant for Lord Krishna is either performed by the
sutradhari or a priest or a Brahmin behind the chakrapith personifying Lord Krishna46.
The eight Gopis recite the twenty-eight to thirty-five slokas one by one, more in the
form of dialogue. The thirty-sixth sloka to be recited by Smt. Radhika is performed by one of the Gopis.

Lord Krishna agrees to dance with the Gopis. As the Sutradhari sings the text of Mandali Sajan, the Gopis stand up and perform the Mapop Dance in Tin Taal, Mel, Tanchap and Chali. The Chakrapith revolves slowly to signify the involvement of Krishna and Radha characters while the Gopis dance around it. Achouba Bhangi pareng is performed. This is the most important sequence in the overall structure of Raas Leela. Detailed examinations of the Bhangi pareng bring forth its close association with the pre-Hindu traditional form of Lai Haraoba's Hakchang Saba or making of the body. This distinctive feature highlights the continuity and the grand synthesis of the native rituals and beliefs to the outside philosophy and text. The Bhangi sequence identifies the divine consummation/union of Lord Krishna with Radha and with Gopis to enhance the process of growth, fertility and procreation. Bhangi is the form of dedication for the pleasure and satisfaction of the Lord. Normally the Achouba Bhangi pareng sequence takes place quite late in the night. Certain strict rules like movements in the audience or any act of disturbances are not allowed as the performance of Bhangi Pareng is done with full concentration. It is the real essence of Raas Leela. The beauty of the intricate Bhangi pareng composition is enhanced with the melodious songs and music.

The actors perform the various choreographed stances and movements particularly the hands and feet. Their faces portray a calm pose and serene expression. The intricate hand movements signifying intricate meanings amidst a pin drop silence audiences are both enchanting and wonderful experience to witness. The dance composition of Bhangi pareng consists of the standing position Trivanga murali pose (holding of flute), uplei (left turning), Chali arongbi (hand movements with palms up), Chali ahaibi (hand movements swinging with palms and fingers up) and Longlei (right turning. The other important steps are Chali apheibi (hands moving sideways), Uplei, Champra okpi dance (a movement of catching a fruit or a ball), Lashing Kappi dance (a movement of cotton
flapping), Khujeng Leibi (turning of wrists), chakra leibi etc. and many other choreographed movements or distinct stances of hands and legs.

Each movement has its own meaning, for e.g. the 'Longlei' in which both hands are raised, facing the body upward then turn towards the right which depicts the act of creation by the Lord and 'Uplei' with right hand stretches out from the bosom that signify everything released from him, then turn to the left with the right hand brought back to the bosom identifying the return to Him again after innumerable cycles of birth. After Bhangi Pareng Achouba, Duital, Tanchap and, Chali dance are performed with the songs of Sutradhari. Lord Krishna's disappearance sequence is one of the major subplots in the structure of Maha Raas Leela. The Antadhyan (or disappearance of Lord Krishna) intensifies the development of the Raas Leela to a great extent. The crux of Maha Raas lies in this particular episode. The Gopis feel immensely proud getting the favours of the Lord. They sing and dance with deep contentment as they consider themselves as the most fortunate to be loved by the Lord.

Lord Krishna seeing their pride and ego disappear with Smt. Radhika in order to teach them the basic lesson of life. Normally the two main actors move out from the central space. Noticing the same feeling of pride in Radhika's mind, Lord Krishna again disappears leaving Radha alone. Altogether Lord Krishna leaves the Gopis including Radha behind and vanishes in the dark night. The Gopis including Smt. Radhika panicked and drowned in sorrow and grief. In the actual Maha Raas Leela performance at Govindaji Mandap the area of the chakrapith is darkened by making the lights dim. In the semi-dark, one of the Gopis moved towards the northwest corner act as Smt. Radhika.

The Gopis personifying as Radha sings in melancholy mood and dance how they search for Lord here and there. She visually acts out her agony. The remaining Gopis go near her and altogether act out the pang of separation. They enact the search of Lord Krishna and wait for him in great anticipation. The slokas are recited by the Sutradhari which
describes the search of Lord by the Gopis enquiring the trees, birds and animals about Krishna. The Gopis perform ‘Gopi Geet’ i.e. song sung by the Gopis themselves. The lyric denotes their sorrows, yet their longing to meet the Lord.

After a while as another plot in the Maha Raas Leela structure the actor playing Lord Krishna re-appear with great enthusiasm. The sutra recites few slokas from the fourth chapter of the Ras Panchadhyay. The light around the chakrapith in the Govindajee Mandap that was darkened is lighted again. It brings back the lively atmosphere once again. The Gopis being excited and exalted dance out the famous ‘Ek Gopi, Ek Shyam’ dance or the cosmic raas i.e. Lord Krishna multiplied himself and dance out the Raas with each Gopi. The dance steps are graceful and some of the splendid facial gestures are expressed. Resulting in each Gopis attaining the divine union with the Lord, achieving divine salvation. However in the Govindaji Mandap, it is performed by each Gopi dancing between Radha and Govinda idols. The songs are totally sung by the sutradhahi.

Then Radha and Krishna perform a duet dance followed by Brindavan Bhangi pareng. This Bhangi pareng is the dance composition mainly describing the beauty of Brindavan. All the Gopis offer flowers or puspanjali at the feet of Radha Govinda. The pujari or Brahmin (priest) will serve and offer aarati to the Radha Govinda idols placed on the chakrapith or to the paired form of Radha and Krishna actors. The child actors are worshipped as the true Lord and Radha and seek blessings from them. The audiences stand up and join the aarati.

The Gopis sing a prathana (sort of prayers) and get the warmth of the tray of fire by their hands and touch their faces, which are an auspicious sign. And with this the Maha Raas Leela performance comes to an end. They enter their houses only after taking a bath. Raas Leela can begin early or late but it should be completed before Mangal aarati. Audiences are not allowed to go to the mandali even if the Raas Leela is concluded before cleaning up the space. All the actors take off the attire, take bath and go inside
their houses in the early morning. In the morning Gopi Bhojan is offered where the priests and other Vaishnav devotees along with the participant whereabout can take part.

**Songs**

The songs of the Raas Leela are presented either in solo, duet and chorus attributed and interchanged couple of times. The songs are concerned with the immortal story of the divine love of the Lord and his consort. Most of the songs are sung by the Sutra. The female Sutra sings the songs of Radha and Gopis of the Raas Leela. The Gopis give chorus in some episodes of the leela. Songs are sung in between by the chorus. The Songs of the Raas Leela are set in *Tin Tal* (seven beats and three stresses) *Tanchap* (three beats and one stress) and *Menkup* (three beats and one stress) in succession. Male singers of the chorus sing the songs of Krishna.

The songs are generally in Sanskrit, Brajaboli and Bengali taken from the relevant chapters of Vaishnav Padavali texts. In one of the recent developments, Manipuri songs are replacing the previous text within the Imphal valley. In far flung areas Bengali songs are still in vogue. The texts however differ according to the types of Raas Leelas. Not a word of Manipuri was introduced in the earlier performance. The renowned Gurus and teachers make modifications from time to time in the songs. The change however does not affect the four songs of Bhangi. In the beginning Bengali and Sanskrit lyrics were translated by oja Amubi and oja Tomba into Manipuri. The replacement by Manipuri songs in the Raas Leela performance has made the audience understood the meanings easily.

The songs of sutra during Bhangi pareng do not necessarily depict the intrinsic meaning of Bhangi. Infact, it highlights the outer or exterior beauty, graceful and poised movements in a lyrical & rhythmic way. There are five kinds of Bhangi songs – *Talheiya, Nachta, Padeina, Sugadh, Rasmayi, Dakhiniti*. 
Dance

The Raas Leela follows a well codified and definite dance technique. The *khutheks* (gestures) signify important symbolic representations which carries the essence of Bhakti rasa. The syllables uttered accompanying each movement or *bols* (a syllable utilised to accompany each movement) is taught to the students. The most important dance step of covering the space is *chali*. It is graceful and delicate foot work involving the hands\(^56\). The faces of the Gopis are veiled to avoid direct communication through the eyes with the audience.

The movements of the lower part of the body are restricted and the hands and torso part of the body are used within limits. The dances and subdued acting are choreographed according to the intricate themes and plots. Poised movements and gaits of swan, peacock, elephants, etc are depicted. The dance form is similar in all the types of Raas Leelas. Pre 2\(^{nd}\) WW and post 2\(^{nd}\) WW Raas Leelas depict a great difference in the dance forms. The seemingly easy movements are imbibed with intricacies, complexities and subtleties. The chali as one of the basic dance movements is reflected in the composition of Bhangi pareng, Radha Nartan, Krishna Nartan, etc. “The basic movements of the Chali are connected to form the various types of parengs (series of body movements)”\(^37\).

**Bhangi Pareng**

*Bhangi pareng* (pareng signifies cadences in a given metrical cycle) is a series of stately dance postures codified along with the bols\(^58\). It is a dance composition of body flexions performed to the rhythm of the melodious musical instruments. “The Bhangi Pareng dance movements specially the body and hand gestures formed by king Bheigyachandra are based on the already existing forms”\(^39\). “Rasrastrivangarup” – three body poses are the main forms of *Bhangi Pareng Achouba* (a major Bhangi form). The Gopis dance the Bhangi sequences which represent the forming of Lord Krishna *srimurti* or
It is a dance composition of continuous basic movements of the body incorporating the variations of the body parts. The Gopis recollect each step and stances of Lord Krishna and enact the movements of Sri Krishna's form. Bhangi achouba pareng is the most important, which also depicts the joy of the Gopis in different symbolic gestures. Therefore, Bhangi is referred as the soul of Raas Leela. Changes and development must have definitely taken place in the composition of Bhangi parengs. The present Bhangi Pareng could have undergone tremendous stylization as time went by. Bhangi pareng which is considered as the soul of Raas Leela is taken seriously even while learning. The first day of learning Bhangi normally begins on an auspicious day with performing puja. “Though the Bhangi is taken as pure dance of seer externally, however its inner meaning is the building up of the Sri Govinda form”, most probably taken out from Lai Haraoba. “Hakchang saba”. The term Bhangi pareng also signifies the basic pose and movements of nritta.

Bhangi is referred in the performing art forms of Orrisa, Assam and Manipur. However the significance and reference are in different levels. Few scholars also hinted the closeness of Manipur Raas Leela and Shatriya Dance of Assam. In Assam’s shatriya dance the term Bhangi is named and associated with the characters of the performance like Sutradhari Bhangi, Krishna Bhangi, Gopi Bhangi etc. In spite of certain physical resemblance, the intrinsic meanings are ocean apart. The Bhangi of Shatriya is thus different from Manipuri Raas Leela in the essence, thoughts, usage and in the dance movements/pose. To claim the similarities of these two performances just because of a same name in its satisfaction will be a far fetched idea. Though related in a Vaishnavite context these two art forms flourished in its own specific regional cultural settings.

The term Bhangi in Manipuri Raas Leela is technically used in the five kinds of Bhangi
pareng. King Bheigyachandra introduced Bhangi pareng Achouba and king Chandrakirti created Brindavan Bhangi Pareng and Khurumba pareng. These three Bhangi types are for the Gopis. Whereas Gostha Bhangi pareng and Gostha Vrindavan Pareng are for the Gopas (mainly used in Gostha Leela). The codified body stances and gestures of the Bhangi transcend the audiences into the divine world where they could visualize the sambhog or union or consummation of Radha Krishna and the Lord with Gopis. For the Vaishnav devotees it is the time of prayer with full concentration and creates the image of the Lord in their own hearts. This kind of sambhog with the lord is of the purest form devoid of kama and profanity.

Raas Leela in relation with Lai Haraoba

There is closeness in the Lai Haraoba and Raas Leela. Lai Haraoba is performed in front of the presiding Lainingthou and Lairemma and the Raas Leela of king Bheigyachandra is also offered in the service of Govindaji and Rasheshwari. The concept of Nongpok Ningthou and Panthoibi is treated equally in terms of Goudiya Vaishnav’s Radha and Krishna, one observed as Father and the other as Mother and the later as Lord and his consort. The union of the male and female principles are stressed in the overall performance. The essence of both the characters of Lai Haraoba and Raas Leela is the same. The basic ideology and principles are quite similar. Nongpok Ningthou and Panthoibi are synthesized with Krishna and Radha and the divine Krishna play is expressed in the native music and dance form.

There are many similarities in the structure of both the performances. The Lai phi setpa in Lai Ekouba, infusing the spirits to the deities and amaibi dance are adopted through minor innovations in the Raas Leela where the deities (idols) are adorned, then taken out in the Mandap and infused life. The lei langba sequence is performed in Lai Haraoba before the beginning of dance by the priestess or Amaibi. In Raas Leela, flower & sandle paste or leichandan is offered to the distinct guests, actors, etc. after Nata Sankirtana as
purvaranga by the Arangpham or the arranger. The entire enactment of male and female
principles and laibou cycle is performed in Raas Leela’s bhangi pareng episode. “Some
scholars opined the Raas Leela as seen by king Bheigyachandra in his dreams and created
out of it… there is a possibility of Sri Govinda to show the Raas Leela in Rajarshi’
dreams but it could be the already seen Lai Haraoba and nothing else”65.

A close analysis of the dance movements and gesture reveals a great resemblance. The
Chali khuthek of Raas Leela is same with panthoibi jagoi of Lai Haraoba. For e.g. the
left-right swinging Panthoibi dance is chali ahaibi in Raas Leela. Bhangi pareng dance
is also from laibungthou & lainura phibul jagoi. The pamyan dance of Lai Haraoba
like lashing kappi jagoi, champra okpi and champra khaibi dance movements are
used in Raas Leela. Phibul okpi sequence can be compared with the Krishna dance, etc.
So most of the dance and khutheks (hand gestures) in Raas Leela are innovated from the
Lai Haraoba.

Manipuri Raas Leela is quite different from other forms of Raas Leela prevailing outside
the state because of the native influence. Raas Leela prevails in regions like Maharastra,
Rajasthan, Gujarat, Bengal, Assam, South India, etc, but each differs according to their
distinctive folklore and ethos. Of all these forms, either popularized today as folk genres,
Manipuri Raas Leela has an edge over the other Raas Leelas and has attained a classical
status. “The Raas Leela of Manipur is one of the most remarkable achievements in Asian
art. I know nothing more musically competent, as spiritually moving or even vaguely
resembling it anywhere in the world… The singers in their ornamented costume move
through the eight hour performance. Their singing different from that found in India is
full of vibratos trills, catches in the throat and an ecstatic warmth that the rigid methodical
performances of India lack as per as the unaccustomed Western ear is concerned… It
focuses on the ecstatic relationship between worshipper and God” 66. The Raas Leela
theatre remains the most popular and affective medium of visualizing the Krishna lore
because it has incorporated in its fold elements from various dramatic presentations.
End Notes:


15. *Mera Waphukpa* is the customary practice of the removal of a bamboo pole which has been inserted one month before with the coming of Mera or October season. The bamboo pole is affixed with the lantern that signifies auspiciousness and good luck. Even on the Mera
Wayungba Day, Raas Leela is performed.


17 Scholars gave different views regarding the celebration of the first Raas leela performance for five days. One main argument would be due to the traditional five days principle regarding the accession to the throne coronation ceremony or ‘Phambal Kaba’ which is a part of the traditional belief system.


25 Achom Tomba was called by king Churchand in the palace and questioned the performance of Diba Raas in day time. It became a big issue. Brahma Sabha advised the king about the practicability of Diba Raas performance in daytime, as it was originally played at Ambhuya Kunja.


28 N. Tombi, op. cit., p. 205.

29 Scholars propound that the dress of Krishna and Gopis are based on the concept of Trikatcha of the Maibis of pre-Hindu Lai Haraoba. The veil of the Gopis is also used in the Lai Haraoba
by the amaibi during lai ekouba, lai nupi thiba, laimang phamba, etc.


31 In marriage potloi is used without koktumbi and poshwan.

32 The main purpose is to hide the feet from the Lord.

33 A silk cloth is stiched on the stiffen starch cloth.


35 In Maharaja Churchand’s time Maikhum phi is known as ‘phijao Happi’ i.e. a big inafi was used. In Nitya Raas leela ‘Maikhum phi’ is not used rather the hair is combed neatly and knotted.

36 Though according to the old purana, the role of Radha was to be played by a married woman or by someone older than Sri Krishna. However in Manipur Raas Leela the role of Radha is performed by a young girl as small as portraying Krishna.


39 Ibid, p. 50.

40 The introduction of Esraj as musical instrument in Raas Leela could be a late entry as it was not found in the early stage of the performance.


43 Personal interview


46 Ibid, p. 10.


Surchand Sharma, “Bhangi in Manipuri Ras Dance”, op. cit., p. 3.

Maisnam Guru Amubi Singh, op.cit., p. 45.

Few scholars claimed the absence of ‘Ek Gopi, Ek Shyam’ episode in Govindajee Mandap due to the omission of Radha and Govinda abhisar.

In the performance textual structure, the Maha Raas ends with the wish of Lord Krishan for the Gopis to go back to their own homes or Grihagaman. In performance wise, a white cloth is laid down on the western gate and with the end of the Raas Leela all the performers cross it which signify the Grihagaman or crossing the River Yamuna for home.

M. Kriti, op. cit., p. 219.


Oja Amubi also composed dance based on Geet Govinda in pre 2nd World War.

The performers first move to the front then to the back with the hands moving in an up and down manner. Then covers the sideways by circle.

Kapila Vatsayayan, Introduction, op. cit.


Ibid., p. 5.


Maheswar Neog, Sankardeva and His Times, (Guwahati: Guwahati University, 1965), p. 272.


Photo 11: Raas Leela in the Govindaji Pavilion. Gopis encircling the Rasheswari Govinda idols placed on the chakrapith.

(Courtesy: N. Basanta)

Photo 12: Child actors as Krishna & Radha in local pavilion.
Photo 13: One of the sequences of Raas Leela.

Photo 14: Offering of aarati at the end of Raas Leela.