

The emergence of Nata Sankirtana: A Ritualistic Dance Performance

Warda Rihab*

Abstract: *Nata Sankirtana is a sacred Manipuri ritualistic dance performance, deeply intertwined with spirituality and traditional rituals. While it may initially appear as a musical dance form driven by the performer's skills, it holds a profound philosophy, requiring a holistic meditation of the body, mind, and soul. This research paper focuses on the transformation of Nata Sankirtana from local rituals to stage performances, with a particular emphasis on its elegance, unique movements, mudras, and dance styles when viewed from the perspective of Bangladesh. This exploratory research employs qualitative data from secondary sources to provide insights into the various aspects of Nata Sankirtana, including ritual accessories, costumes, musical instruments, songs, functionalities, performance space, and structure. Nata Sankirtana's ancient and ritualistic nature has significantly influenced Manipuri dance and choreography. It is a form of performing arts that serves as a gateway to spiritual enlightenment and a deeper connection with the divine, accessible only to sincere devotees who approach it with a genuine desire to explore its spiritual depths.*

Keywords: *Nata Sankirtana, Dance performance, Manipuri, Ritual, Choreography.*

Introduction

The term “Nata” comes from the Sanskrit word that means “to act” (Ghosh, M, 1951) or “to dance” (Ghosh, M, 1934). A “Nata” is a performer who embodies the emotions and sentiments of people through dance, conveying the Rasa and Bhava while fulfilling the four Abhinayas of Angika, Aharya, Vachika, and Sattvika. The Abhinaya Darpana and the Natya Shastra emphasizes the role of the “Nata” as a performer who conveys emotions through the four Abhinayas in theatrical productions. “Nata Pala” refers to a congregation of many Natas or actors. Therefore, “Nata Sankirtana” is a performance-based art form by many actors that stands out due to its inherent theatrical dynamics.

Although Nata Sankirtana may appear to be a superficial musical dance form dominated by the performer's skills, it has its own philosophy. Through Nata Sankirtana, the performer engages in a holistic meditation that involves the body, mind, and soul. In addition to the performance itself, the devotee is also enlightened and can attain

* Lecturer, Department of Dance, University of Dhaka

salvation. The transcendent love of the Radha and Krishna union enables both the performers and participants. Nata Sankirtana has become a prominent means of achieving spiritual goals among the various performing art forms.

Objectives

The objectives of the study are -

- a) To explore the Nata Sankirtana a ritualistic performance of Manipur.
- b) To discover the various movements, mudras, and talas used in Nata Sankirtana.
- c) To explore the different musical instruments used in Nata Sankirtana.
- d) To recommend the Nata Sankirtana as a dance performance so that it will enhance the dance sector in Bangladesh.

Methodology

The study is exploratory in nature and used qualitative data for executed the research. The researcher has used secondary data for this study.

The rationale of the study

Nata Sankirtana is a very ancient and ritualistic dance performance that has a huge impact on Manipuri dance. Indian researchers and dancer Dr. Sruti Bandopadhyay have executed research where she mentioned Nata Sankirtana as a ritualistic dance performance (Bandopadhyay, S, 2010). And in my research, I will try to explore the Nata sankirtana from the perspective of Bangladesh and will try to present that it is an elegant dance performance that has many innovative body movements, mudras and dance style, music, etc. The proper implementation of the Nata Sankirtana will be an enriched Manipuri dance platform.

Findings

History

Nata Sankirtana is a cultural and spiritual practice that has evolved over time in Manipur. It was influenced by the Vaishnavite tradition of devotional singing known as 'Bangladesh Kirtan' The origins of this tradition in Manipur are not entirely clear, but it is believed to have begun with the construction of a Vishnu temple during the reign of King Kiyamba in the late 15th century (Bandopadhyay, S , 2010)This led people to present Sankirtana as a form of reverence to Vishnu. Subsequently, King Charairongba and many of his subjects adopted Bhagavat Dikshya and began worshipping Lord Krishna through Hari Sankirtana in 1697 AD.Drupad Hari Sankirtana, also called Ariba Sankirtana or Bangladesh Pala, was founded by Maharaj Garibaniwaz in 1709 and was used in funeral ceremonies such as Asti and Shraddha. It gained prominence in Manipur from 1763 to 1798 AD, during the reign of Maharaj Bhagyachandra, along with Gourchandrika and Goura

Bhavi. Nortom Thakur Mahasoï, considered to be the incarnation of Maharaj Bhagyachandra, further popularized this tradition during his reign (Jhaveri and Devi, 1993). He built the temple of Sri Govindajee and introduced Lord Krishna's Rasa Kirtan, which became a popular form of worship. Dhrumel Hari Sankirtana was the original name given to Drupad Hari Sankirtana, but it was later renamed Nata Sankirtana to reflect the idea of prayer through Sankirtana. As a result, Drupad Sankirtana in Manipur was divided into two types: Ariba Sankirtana or Bangadesh Pala, and Nata Sankirtana or Anouba Pala. The latter became the most popular form of Nata Sankirtana, performed in groups with musical accompaniment, and is still practiced widely in Manipur today. The tradition of Nata Sankirtana has deep cultural and spiritual significance in Manipuri society and continues to be an essential part of their heritage (Singh, M T, 2018).

Nata Sankirtana in Bangladesh



From the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century, due to various political and social phenomena flows and war, the victims left their countries. The residents of the Northeast of Manipur, India took shelter in various areas of India and Bangladesh. A huge number of Manipuri people migrated to the area of nearest Assam, Tripura, and Bangladesh. During the Burma – Manipur war (1819-1825), the king of Manipur, Chaurajit Singh, and two of his brothers Marjit Singh and Gambhir Singh took shelter in Sylhet. After the war, many of them returned to their own country but some Manipuri people became permanent residents in their new places. Manipuri people who came to Bangladesh, settle down in Bramhanbaria, Mymensingh, Dhaka, and the larger part of Sylhet (Banglapedia, 2021. Retrieved from https://en.banglapedia.org/index.php/Manipuri,_The) . At present the Manipuri community lives in the Sylhet division. The Manipuri people in Sylhet possess a wealth of indigenous repertoires in dance, songs, and music. They also perform Nata Sankirtana in various ceremonies and rituals associated with birth and death

Classificaitons of Nata Sankirtana

Nata Sankirtana can be classified into different forms that depict Bhakti rasa based on the purpose, seasons, and context of the rituals (Waikhom, R , 2004) . The various forms of Nata Sankirtana include:

- Nata Maha Sankirtana (performed during Sradha and marriage ceremony)
- Kirtan Khongshangba (elongated Kirtan)
- Dhrumel (drum chorus)
- Bashok Sheishak (song of Clapper girls)
- Naam pala (chorus and chants)
- Katha Kirtan (story processions)
- Nagar Kirtan (ritual procession)
- Ashti sanchay (fifth day after cremation)
- Porok Sheishak (ritual songs for the dead)
- Basanta Holi style in Rathayatra
- Jaidev Dasavatar kirtan (waking up Lord Jagannath)
- Khubak eshei (mainly women chorus)
- Shayon performance

The Nata Maha Sankirtana is an integral part of various festivals, such as Holi, Rathayatra, and the legends of Krishna Radha. It has also become an inseparable element of various rites-de-passage, including Annaprashana, Karna vedha, Upnayan, Lu hongba, Shradha, and Firoi. The Kirtan Khongshangba is a type of sankirtana that is usually performed in memory of deceased ancestors and can include Dhrumel performances. Dhrumel is a type of sankirtana that involves a group of drummers with distinct rhythm patterns, and different scholars and gurus introduce various forms of Sankirtana Dhrumel, such as Maha Dhrumel, Devi Dhrumel, and Goura Dhrumel. Strict rules enforced during the performance of Dhrumel. However, the most significant Nata Sankirtana performance occurs during the Shradha Ceremony, a religious ritual that follows the death of a Hindu person. Both male and female singers, known as Nupa Pala and Nupi Pala, respectively, perform in most rites-de-passage (Waikhom, R, 2004) except for shraddha, asthi, and phiroy. Men, women, and children all participate in Khubak eshei, which involves clapping hands to the tune of Abhinaya Cholom. During festivals like Holi, groups of both professional and amateur performers present the Basanta Holi Shishak. Additionally, in honor of Lord Krishna and Radha, performers that include men, women, and children perform the Jhulon and Jalakeli leelas for several days. The Shayan sheishak of Mera month (November) is similar to the Katha Kirtan and Nagar Kirtan (Waikhom, R, 2004).

Dress or Costume

The Nata Sankirtana performers follow a specific dress code, including the compulsory Ashta Vesh dress which consists of eight elements (Waikhom , R, 2004) The Trikatcha Pheijom or Dhoti is an important element of the dress, with pleats falling loosely from the front and back twisted elegantly and tucked in. The performers also wear Kunja to hide their toes, and a Khwangchet around their

waist. At the beginning of the performance, the performers put a cloth of Lengyan on the left shoulder, and at the end of the performance, the host offers Innafi to all performers. Kokyet, a turban, is also an essential part of the Nata Sankirtana dress, with different groups having specific styles (Bandopadhyay, S, 2010). Sandal paste marks, lungoon, and uric are also worn by the performers, while make-up is avoided as the performance is more related to ritualistic bhakti-oriented performances. The dress code finalized during the period of King Churhand, with contributions from the royal court. The performers dress up in the performance area, as there is no green room to change their attire (Waikhom, R ,2004).



Performers

The Nata Sankirtana is predominantly performed by the pala artists, who can come from any age group and do not require any specific lineage or hereditary profession. To become a pala performer, one needs to have a good singing voice, pleasing physical features, and a strong dedication to chanting Harinam and following the basic tenets of Vaishnava religion (Waikhom, R, 2004). In the Nata Sankirtana tradition, a disciple has the privilege of acquiring essential skills and knowledge from a highly respected guru. By doing so, they gain the opportunity to become a follower and actively participate in the Sankirtana group. It is of utmost importance for the performer to uphold discipline, exhibit good behavior, and demonstrate utmost respect and devotion to their guru, thereby upholding the sacred Guru-Shishya parampara (teacher-disciple relationship) (Jhaveri and Devi, 1993). This reverence ensures the preservation and continuation of this esteemed tradition.

In the Nata Sankirtana group, the roles of Esheihanba, Duhar, and Pung Yeibas are of utmost importance (Bandopadhyay, S, 2010). The Duhar performer serves as the leader of cholom and should possess distinctive physical features and a deep understanding of cholom abhinaya. The Khonbangba, or the voice assistant to the lead singer, must have exceptional singing abilities. The lead singer holds the pivotal position within the pala, guiding and overseeing the entire Nata Sankirtana performance. Their occupation is deeply intertwined with spirituality, and when they step into the Nata Sankirtana mandap, they symbolically transcend their individuality and immerse themselves in the world of Sri Chaitanya and his divine

realm (Waikhom, R, 2004). In the Nata Sankirtana tradition, Moibung Khongba holds a significant position as they perform a vital role (Bandopadhyay, S, 2010). Their responsibility is to blow the moibung, a conch shell, at the commencement and culmination of the performance. Additionally, they may use the conch shell at specific intervals between Sankirtana songs, marking the conclusion and commencement of different episodes. The melodious sound produced by the conch shell is an integral element of Nata Sankirtana music, adding depth and resonance to the performance. It is worth noting that both the Mandap Mapu and Moibung Khongba are seated performers, contributing to the captivating ambiance during the ceremony (Waikhom, R ,2004) .

Musical Instruments

Accompanying the songs in Nata Sankirtana are the Pung, also known as the Mridanga, and the Kartal, a pair of cymbals (Waikhom, R, 2004). The shape, size, and sound of these instruments are tailor-made for the specific theme and function of Nata Sankirtana.

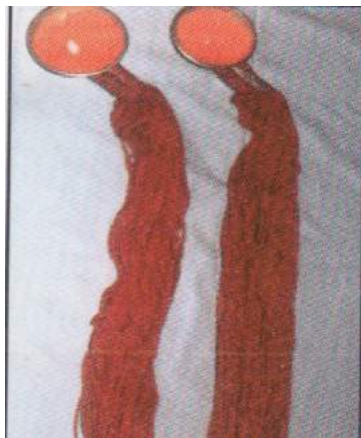
Pung Or Mridanga

The Pung, in particular, is capable of producing an astonishing range of sounds that must be heard to be fully appreciated. It is likely that no other percussion instrument can communicate such a diverse range of sounds as effectively as the Pung. It was during the era of King Bhagyachandra that the Nata Sankirtana Pung took on its current form (Waikhom, R, 2004). This double-faced drum consists of a maru face made from cow skin and a manou face made from calfskin, both coated with black loading. The parchment is secured with leather straps and fastened with a cotton belt passing through brass rings. Originally, the Ariba Pala's Ariba Pung had a longer structure, but it was adapted for Nata Sankirtana, resulting in a lighter, softer, and shorter version. Additionally, it is now covered with a white cotton cloth, which adds to its aesthetic appeal and cultural significance. The Manipuri Vaishnavas hold the Pung drum in high esteem, considering it as a manifestation of Sri Krishna himself, with the drum's color symbolizing Shyam Varna, Lord Krishna's color (Waikhom, R, 2004). Each part of the drum represents Lord Krishna, Radhika, Gopis, and other characters in the Krishna cycle. The Pung is considered a sacred object, and holy verses are recited before playing or teaching it. The sound of the Pung is associated with Sri Krishna, Radhika, Sri Chaitanya, Nityanand, and Sri Advaita, with each syllable of the drum having a unique interpretation. During the Nata Sankirtana, the Pung evokes the rasa of Sri Chaitanya, Nityanand, and Radha-Krishna.



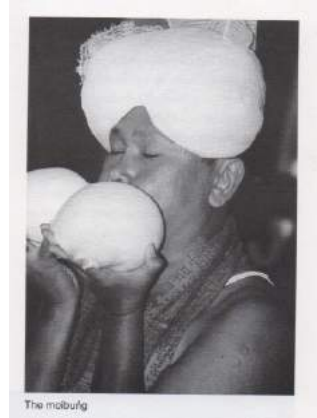
Kartal

The cymbal, commonly known as the Kartal, holds a significant place among the percussion instruments. It is played by hand and comprises two saucer-shaped brass disks, featuring a central depression and a hole through which a handle is attached, either made of colored fabric or interlaced threads. In Manipuri music, two types of cymbals are utilized: the Bangadesh pala's cymbal and the Nata pala's Kartal (Waikhom, R, 2004). During the reign of King Bhagyachandra, the Kartal underwent a redesign, resulting in a smaller and heavier version. The Kartal, crafted from brass and adorned with a golden hue, symbolically represents the radiant complexion of Radha. Its melodious sound is believed to mirror the sweet voice of Radha. Notably, the cymbal's handle is intricately fashioned to resemble the cascading and exquisite tresses of Radha, meticulously crafted using knotted threads of cotton. The Anouba Nata pala Kartal has longer handles, around 8 inches long, made of Kabrang or silk threads and is more suitable for the graceful cholom performance compared to the Ariba pala, whose handles are shorter (Waikhom, R , 2004).



Moibung

The conch shell is a wind instrument blown by mouth and has been used since ancient times. In Nata Sankirtana, the conch shell is blown at the beginning and end of the performance, signifying its auspiciousness (Jhaveri and Devi, 2010)



Performance Space

To perform any kind of ritual or ceremony, a suitable space is required. In the case of the Nata Sankirtana, a mandap is usually used, which can either be a permanent structure attached to a temple or a temporary one built in the courtyard. The spatial arrangement and direction of the mandap are designed to evoke the atmosphere of Brindavan bhava, Nabadweep, and Lai Haraoba. The mandap has its own codes, styles, and architectural features and is often constructed as an extension of the temple. The central area of the mandap, known as Mandali (Waikhom, R, 2004), is where the Nata Sankirtana is performed.

Dance elements of Nata Sankirtana



Cholom

The Nata Sankirtana pala's role is to perform rhythmic dance movements accompanied by drumming and cymbals, all of which follow specific time measures and rhythm. These movements and gestures, collectively referred to as 'Cholom' in Manipur, are an essential component of Nata Sankirtana. Both cymbal and drum players participate in Cholom. Cholom is a Sanskrit term (Waikhom, R, 2004) meaning a sequence of composed movements, and it is commonly considered a dance performance for men. During Cholom, the movements should be limited to the realm of bhakti or devotion. Therefore, any gestures or expressions of the eyes and body should convey bhakti and humility.

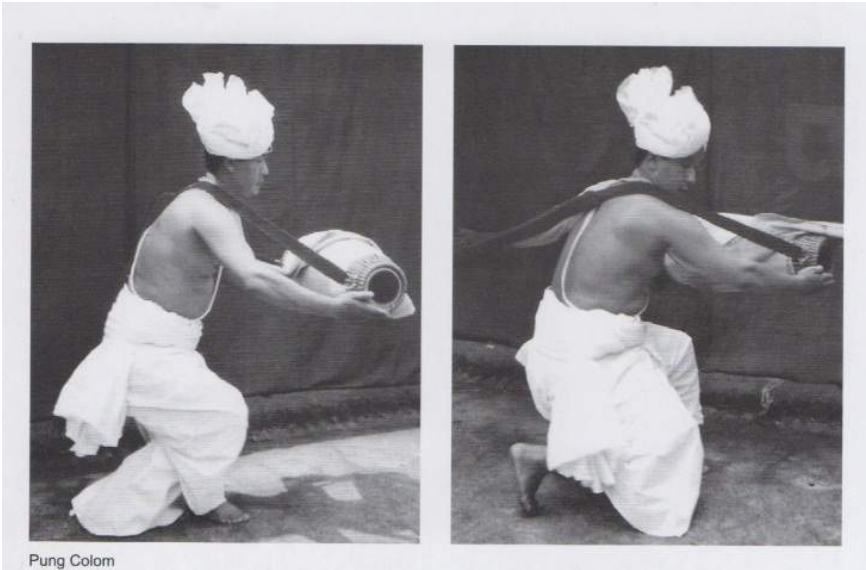
Pung Cholom

The Pung cholom dance is performed by two drummers who accompany their own drum beats (Waikhom, R, 2004). The performers of Pung cholom have more freedom, and their movements appear acrobatic with a range of spiral movements, sometimes even off the ground, demanding a keen sense of balance and rhythm. The Cholom dance is a unique creation of the Manipuri people, primarily a male dance form, with techniques that differ from the tandava dances of the Rasalila style (Bandopadhyay, S, 2010, p. 140). However, the lasya part of Cholom is similar to that of the Rasalila. The Cholom tandava has become a popular item in recent times and primarily focuses on technique, with fewer abhinayas or facial expressions. To make it more appealing to the audience, acrobatic movements are often included. Achieving perfection in technique requires a lot of practice and dedication.

The main posture of the Cholom dance involves three bend (Bandopadhyay , S, 2010 p. 140) :

- One from the head to the waist,
- The second from the waist to the knees, and
- The third from the knees to the heels.

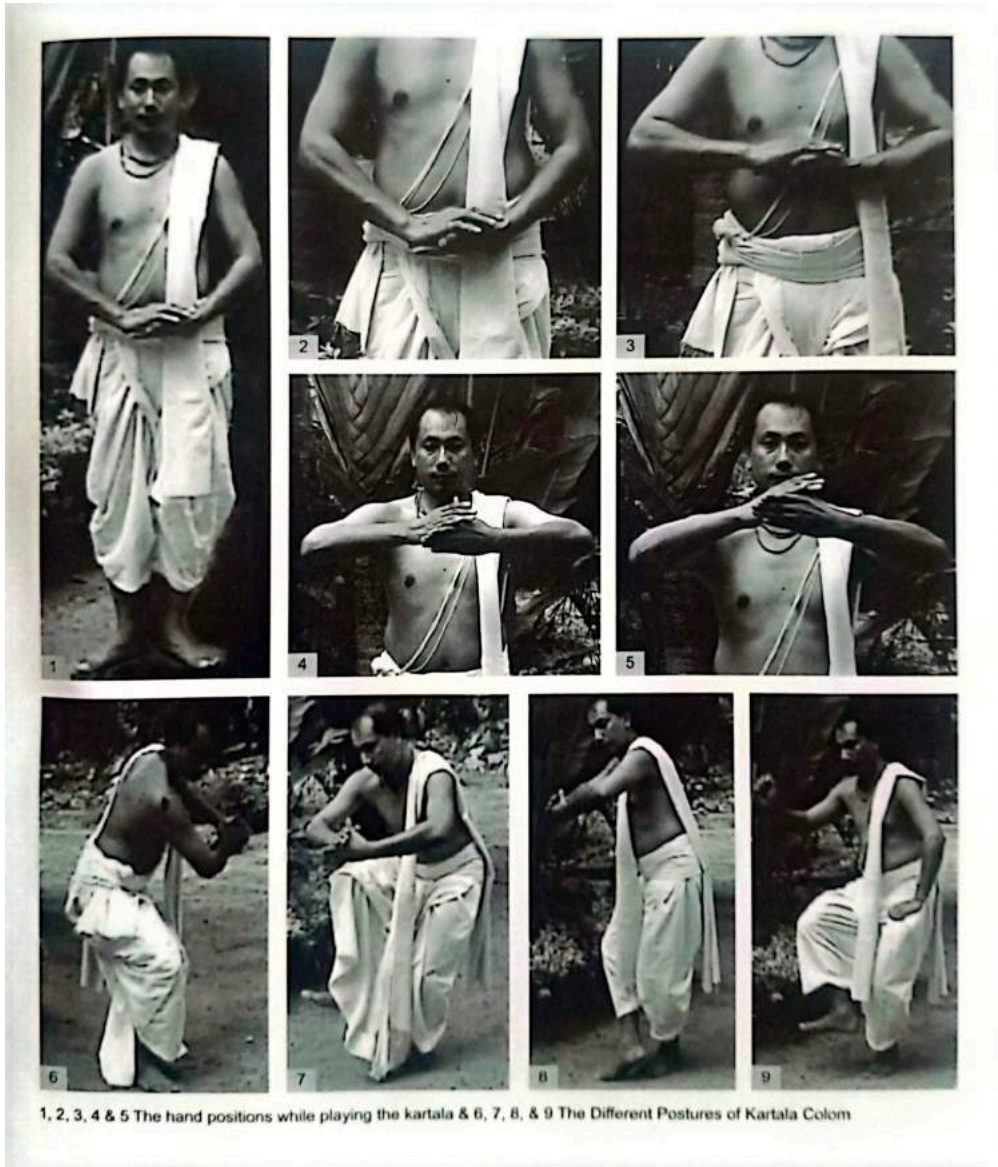
This posture is directly influenced by Krishna's posture, which has three bends and is popularly called the tribhangi (tri or three and bhangi is posture). While dancing, the feet may go up to the knees but not allowed to go straight up or above the waist. Stretch movements on both sides also not allowed (Bandopadhyay , S, 2010).



Kartal Cholom

Another form of cholom dance is the Kartal cholom, where the performers use kartal instruments in their hands while following a similar style of movement as in other cholom dances (Bandopadhyay , S , 2010). The movements in Kartal cholom are less vigorous and more stylized. At the beginning of the dance, the waist, back, and knees kept in a straight line while the hands hold the Kartal. The performers not only dance but also sing and play the Kartal at the same time. The performance requires concentration on the incarnations of Krishna, such as Govinda, Gopinatha, and Madanmohana, achieved through meditation (Bandhopadhyay, S, 2010, p.141). The bowing posture also used in Kartal cholom.

The hand positions and different postures of Kartal Cholom



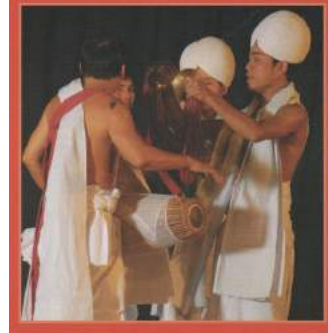


Songs of Nata Sankirtana

The Nata songs revolve around themes of love, devotion, and prayer to the Lord, and they beautifully express the corresponding rasas. These soul-stirring songs create a state of bliss in the minds of listeners, evoking profound emotions that lead ardent devotees to shed tears of love and surrender to the Lord completely. The caliber of a performer or singer can be evaluated through their rendition of the Rajmel episode (Waikhom, R, 2004). The earliest texts of these songs can be traced back to Das Avatar of Geet Govinda, and continuous efforts have been made to refine and enrich the kirtan songs. Nata pala songs have now become an integral part of various life events, and their singing style and techniques have been deeply influenced by the traditional Pena singing forms. However, it's important to note that the Nata pala eshei has its roots in the ancient singing forms and techniques of Manipur, drawing inspiration from its own unique traditions rather than relying solely on external sources. Guru Rasananda has made significant contributions to this tradition by creating a new raga based on the notes "Aa," "Ta," "Aa," "Ri," "Ta," "Na," "Ta," and "Na (Waikhom, R, 2004). Many scholars have not only written lyrics but have also composed melodies and techniques for these songs. While some scholars may have borrowed names of popular ragas like malar and sindhu raga from external sources, the style, techniques, and rhythm employed in Nata songs are entirely distinct. During the reign of King Chandrakirti, notable Brahmins made noteworthy contributions to Nata songs and popularized Manoharsai within the state, further enriching this vibrant musical tradition.

Implication

Although it is a ritualistic performance in the Manipuri community, the dancer can also perform it on stage in front of the audience. As its body movements, mudras, song, and musical instruments are very enriched in nature. Dancers and choreographers can implement it very conveniently during their performances.



Conclusion

Manipur, a state in Northeast India, is renowned for its rich cultural heritage that includes a variety of ancient ritual music and dance forms. Among them, Nata Sankirtana, performed by Manipuri artists, is a significant ritualistic dance that reflects the inner thoughts, desires, longings, and worldview of the people. It involves a combination of musical instruments, performers, performance space, costume, audience, and community participation that collectively create a total ritualistic dance experience. Nata Sankirtana has influenced many dance gurus in India and Bangladesh, who have used Cholom movements in their dance compositions. Various dance festivals feature the precise dance performances of Pung Cholom, Kartal Cholom, and Dhol Cholom. In Bangladesh, Nata Sankirtana performers from Sylhet regularly perform on stage as a dance performance. Today, Nata Sankirtana not only represents devotional singing but also devotional dancing. For modern audiences, the dance aspect has become more crucial than the ritualistic element. As a result, performers have honed their skills and developed the intricacies of the dance to cater to the stage performance. Pung Cholom, with its high jumps, twisting torsos, intricate rhythms played on the Pung, and integrated movements of the feet, neck, and hands, has become the most popular element of the Nata Sankirtana dance. These stunning features of the dance have added an extra dimension to the elegance of Manipuri dance and other dance performances as well.

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