

To

**Amit Saxena**  
Intangible Cultural Heritage Section  
Sangeet Natak Akademi.

Subject : Submission of 6-Months Report on **Research cum Documentation Project on Sankritana Tradition in Manipur** under the Scheme for 'Safeguarding the Intangible Cultural Heritage and Diverse Cultural Traditions of India' – 2014-15.

Sir,

With due respect, as per your letter No. 28-6/ICH-Scheme/36/2014-15 /12765 Dt. 12/03/2015, I am submitting the blueprint of my project entitled '**Research cum Documentation Project on Sankritana Tradition in Manipur**' under the Scheme for 'Safeguarding the Intangible Cultural Heritage and Diverse Cultural Traditions of India' – 2014-15. In this regard you are kindly requested to do the needful.

Thanking you in anticipation.

Yours faithfully,

Dated : 21-12-2015



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**6-MONTHS REPORT ON  
RESEARCH CUM DOCUMENTATION PROJECT ON  
SANKIRTANA TRADITION IN MANIPUR**

UNDER THE SCHEME FOR  
"SAFEGUARDING THE INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE  
AND DIVERSE CULTURAL TRADITIONS OF INDIA" - 2014-15

During the last six month, I have collected some of the important texts related to Manipuri *Nat Sankritana* and documented some performances of *Nata Sankritana*, I have found some preliminary information which is to be analysed critically before writing the final report.

### **Introduction**

To a Manipuri Vaishnavite *Sankritana* is a *mahayagnya*, an inseparable part of life. According to some scholars, the *kritana* singing of Bengal entered in Manipur during the reign of king Kyamaba(1467-1508). However, there are no valid historical records to prove that *kritana* singing entered Manipur during the reign of king Kyamba. During the reign of king Garibanawaja (1709-48) who adopted Ramandi cult, as an old school of *kritana* singing under the style of *Bangdesha pala* or *Ariba pala* became popular and is still preserved and practised at the royal at the royal palace and some other centres of Manipur. King Bhagyachandra introduced a new style of *kritana* singing known as *Nata Sankritana* which is found supreme expression during the reign of king Chandrakirti(1850-1886) when the 64 ragas were presented for the first time in 64 session spreading over 32 days, The Manipuri musician singing *kritana* is called *Nata*, a classical term in Sanskrit, meaning the person who knows the four *abhinayas*. and different types of *natyas*, get himself merged in the *rasa* which he is trying to portray and who appears physically on the stage: a



dancer with songs on the lips. As a matter of fact, Manipuri *Nata Sankritana* represents an extension of *Leela Kritana* of Narottam Thakur Das (16<sup>th</sup> century) of Bengal, with the application of *alapa, raga, tala* etc., and with Goura Chandrika, singing the glories of Shri Krishna Chaitanya to serve almost as a prologue to each *sankritana* performances, a tradition which is still continued in the Manipuri *Nata Sankritana*. The *Nata Sankritana* still ends with Nityai Pada, a few in praise of Nityai, after traversing a long way of about five hours of raga singing mixed with samcharas punctuated by talas- tintal, duital, rajmel and ektal( tanchap and menkup) in a series, giving also sufficient scope of executing the various movement. The padavalis of the various Vaishnava poets in old Bengali, Maithili and Brajabuli including even the compositions of the Great Manipuri vocalists provide the musical text. And the appreciative audience weep and lie prostrate before the musicians as a sign of deep satisfaction. There are other ways of Bengali Kirtana singing like Monoharsai, Dhop and even the classical style of Dhrupad singing more or less their authenticity. The Kirtana of Bengali was reborn, as to say, in artistic soil of Manipur and has been changed almost beyond recognition. It has absorbed the colour of the folk style of singing and assumed a regional tecture and complexion in the presentation of the rasas.

As indicated earlier, Manipuri Sankirtana admits of various types or styles of singing which evolved into distinctive patterns in the course of about 200 years of the proselytisation. Ariba Pala or Bangdesb is the oldest form associated earlier with Ramanandi cult and later changed into the Vaishnavite prayer of Bengal. Leipakchaba and Sevakpalas come under this group. Then came Nata Sankirtana, the highly evolved style of Kirtana singing carrying flavour of this land and its people, which found supreme expression in the presentation of the 64 sessions(of 64 *rasas* in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. There is also



*Monorhorsai*, another type of singing associated with Thakur Narottamdas of Bengal (16 century A.D.) which came from Bengal but which was enriched by various dance patterns of this land. The *Dhop* style of singing along with Chaitanya *Sampradaya* found its great exponents in the 19<sup>th</sup> century A.D. and this is still continued among the *Kirtana* musicians. The *Ras leela* (on *Gosthasthami*) at the royal palace constitute an extension of the *Sankirtana* tradition. It is indeed a pity that *Ras leela* finds appreciation and recognition on an international level, whereas the fragrance of its fountain head i.e., *Sankirtana*, remains confined to the valley of Manipur.

The Bangladesh style is supposed to be introduced by a Kirtan singer who came possibly from Bengal but adopted a Manipuri name. But the style indicates more affinity with the Assamese *Uja Pali* and less with the old style of Bengali Kirtana, even though much of the Manipuri folk tunes have been integrated into it. The first inspiration for this style is Ramanandi cult (with phrases like *Ramo Ramo Govindo*), even though it becomes a prayer of the Manipuri Vaishnavas in the 18<sup>th</sup> century: a forerunner of the *Nata Kirtana* Singing. It is based on the old Indian ragas and raginis and the talas admit of many complicated varieties. Unfortunately this is a dying school, patronised only at the Govindajee temple and a few villages, its importance being eclipsed completely by the *Nata Sankirtana* style. Some attempts are being made to revive this tradition, but with little success. The old order change the yielding place to new.

*Manohorsai*, a classical form of padavali-Kirtana is clearly a gift from Bengal, Thakur Narottamadas, the great Vaishnava saint of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, introduced it on the basis of *dhruva-prabandha-gana* which he had mastered at Vrindavan. His style of *Kirtana* was, of course, *garanthi* and it was recognised as *lila* or *rasa Kirtana*. After him, three other types of Kirtana, *Manoharsai*, *reneti* and *mandarini* evolved. When this style of Kirtana entered Manipur in the 19<sup>th</sup> century A.D., it was known popularly as *Manohorsai*, adopting almost the entire sequence of *Nata Kirtana* singing. A few great names from Bengal are still remembered and a few great masters of Bengal.



It is purely the *Mahajana-Padavali Kirtana* which has assumed almost an integrated texture of the 4 schools of *Padavali-Kirtanas* singing in the form of Manipuri *Monohorsai*. It is still a living tradition, with the old exponents giving their best possible performance. The forerunner of this type of *Padavali-Kirtana* is *Krishan Kirtana* of *Vadu Chadidas* (West Bengal) and Kavi *Vidyapati* (Mithila) which paved the way for *Nama-Kirtana* of Shri *Chaitanya* of 15<sup>th</sup> century. Attempts are being made to present the themes in Manipuri.

In the opinion of Swami Prajnananda, the *dhop* type of Kirtana evolved with the admixture of *Padavali-Kirtana* and the *Panchali* or *Yatra gana*. The *dhop Kirtana* of Bengal entered Manipur in the early part of 19<sup>th</sup> century, almost after it was introduced in Bengal. The theme of the *dhop Kirtana* of Bengal was composed mainly of the sportive plays of Sri Krishna. It was a comparatively light piece. But when this style came in contact with the genius of the Manipuri musicians it is metamorphosed into a serious type of Kirtana, taking up the major themes out Krishnadas Kaviraj such as *Sanaton Sanga*, *Ramananda Sanga*, *Hairdas Nirjan* etc. It then became known as the popular type of Kirtana called *Chaitaya Sampradaya* or the school of *Chaitanya*. It is popularly said that the *dhop kirtana* musicians, when they get up and dance, become popularly has been considerably eclipsed by the *Nata Kirtana* style of singing.

But pride of place should go to the *Tata Kirtana* style of singing which was introduced during the reign of *Rajarshi Bhagyachandra* (1763-1798 A.D.). The great masters and scholars of that period composed and sang the *padavali* strictly after the *Bhagavata* tradition and other major *Vaishnavite* texts and based the composition also on the traditional *ragas* and *raginis* of classical music tradition. Modern research has discovered a lot of regional overtones in the architecture of the particular *ragas* and *raginis*. The Manipuris call the *Nata Kirtana* singing their own and it is clearly a form of collective prayer, a *mahyajanas* as they call it, lasting for about 5 hours at a stretch with as lot of rituals, movements and rhythmic pattern, strictly after the



Vaishnavite faith. *Nata Kirtana* is a composite version of music, dance and *tala*: a *sangeet* in the true sense of the term. It is also *Drishya Kavya*, a poem made visible.

A brief analysis of the preliminary portion of *Nata Sankirtana* done at various temples will make the point clear. There are usually 16 artists forming a circle in the *mandop*. The *abhineta* (called *Isheihanba Dohar*) and his 9 assistants and 2 players on Manipuri *Mridanga* (called *Meitei Pung*). The entire group is called the *pala*. The *Mandop* has a centre with a plantain leaf with a piece of cloth as the seat (*Aasana*) on it and other puja materials) like lamp, pana and fruits. This is called *mandali puja* as 5 of the Vaishnava saints viz., Sri Krishna Cahitanya, Nityananda, Advaita, Gadadhar and Srivasa are supposed to be seated and worshipped.

According to the Vaishnavite text, *Bhakti Ratnakara*, *Kholaj* (*Mridanga*) and *Kartala* constitute the wealth of lord Chaitanya and both are to be worshipped. Following this tradition, the 16 sets of *Kartalas* (*Ghan Vadyas*) and the two *mridangas* are worshipped with lamp, *tilaks* and incense with all the artists, almost playing the role of the priests of a former of the *Yajna*. This is the *adhivasa* stage of *sankirtana yajna*. The president of the assembly (called *Mandapa mapu* in Manipuri) then makes the announcement in Bengali language: *Valaha Premse Kaho Shri Radhakrishna Bhakta Prabhu Nityai Chaitanya Advaita Kahata Santa Sadho Madhuras Vani Hare Hare*. When this recitation reaches the Cahitanya, the *mridanga* players strike the bol-'*Ten Ten Tat Ta Tang*' stage which is known as the beginning of the major raga of *Mridanga*. Before this *alapa* stage, the *mridanga* raga will go along with a recitation in Bengali form *Isheihanba-Krishna Priti Ananda Hari bolo'* to which all the remaining *Nartakas* respond with the voice – *Hare Hare*. This will be followed by a series of *mridanga* bolas along with the striking sound of the *Kartalas* known as the *sanchara* of *Mridanga*. Out of various *sancharas*



numbering more than 30, usually Kartik *snachara* is chosen at this stage. When this finishes, the *Isheihanba* starts the *Sabha Vandana raga* which should deal with a theme of Chaitanya known as Gourachandra. This is just an introductory portion of a full length before the artists and cries of *bhalo* (well done) as a mark of deep appreciation.

After the exciting climax of *Rajamela*, there is scope for the *Dohara* and other artists to execute a few exquisite movements known as *Cholom* (derived from Sanskrit *Cahlanam*) which are highly complicated, graceful and vigorous. These constitute the *Tandava* portion of classical Manipuri dance and various *gatis* (gaits) of the movements of the birds, snake and other animals are executed with considerable artistry. The players on *mridanga* are also given to reveal a little of their mastery over *talas* and rhythmic patterns which simply overwhelm the audience. Out of about 40 are still being used by the gurus. Every great *mridanga* guru makes it a point to compose a few set *talas*, called *tala pradandhas* to the accompaniment of a particular *padavali* text. For example, the *tala Brahma tala* admits of a few set compositions and the particular *tala* is afterwards known by the first lines of the *Pada* – like *Nritanti Bipine* or *Dekha Goura*.

As a matter of fact all these set *talas* are presented occasionally when the *tala phangnaba* (Festival of *talas*) is arranged at the various temples. Quite unlike some other traditions, Manipuri *tala* has got introductory *ragas* and *samcharas* (corresponding to *sanchari bhavas*) which are fixed compositions of the great masters.

A unique type of Manipuri *Nata Sankritana* is *dhrumel*. There are 14 *mirdanga* players in it and the entire sequence of *Nata Sankritana* is followed. The accent here is on the complicated *talas* known as *sancharas* which number 14 and dedicated to 14 groups of Bengal Vaishnavism. The first Chaitanya *sanchara* will be followed by 13 remaining *sancharas* dedicated respectively to Nityananda, Advaita, Godadhar, Srivasa, Dwadas Gopala, Asta Mahanta, six Goswamins, 64 Mohanta, Goura Bhakta, Vrinda, Sat Sampradaya, 14 *mirdangas*, all the bhaktas and lastly Srimad Radha Govinda. Thus Dhruba

Melaka is a highly stylized, ritual pattern of yajnya which involves a lot of training expense and patience. It admits four types: 1. Maha Dhrumel, 2. Goura Dhrumel, 3. Nityai Dhrumel and 4. Lairemma Dhrumel.

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