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SHUTRADHARI OF MANIPURI RAAS LEELA

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ABSTRACT
Manipuri Raas Leela is one of the major Indian classical dance forms, originating from the state of Manipur. It is one of the greatest cultural achievements of the traditional Vaishnavism adhering Meitei people of Manipur. Owing to the Meitei civilization, the classical dance form, first formally developed by Rajarshri Bhagyachandra, one of the King of Manipur, is considered to be the highest spiritual expression of the worship of Hindu deity Krishna and the theme is based on Prem Bhakti Rasa experience of divine love that expressed through dance particularly within the context of devotional practices. The main objective is to explore and highlight the important role of Shutradhari in Manipuri Raas Leela. The study has adopted an observation method including participant and non-participant approaches, images and interviews of different Shutradhari of Manipuri Raas Leela. They have specific attire that complements the overall aesthetic of the performance. Shutradhari plays an essential role in enhancing the cultural authenticity and visual spectacle of the dance performance of Manipuri Rass Leela. The attire reflects the rich heritage and aesthetic sensibilities of Manipuri culture while complementing the narrative and thematic elements of the Raas Leela. This study intends to demonstrate the ongoing significance and evolution of this distinctive narrative device in both traditional and modern contexts by placing the Shutradhari within the larger framework of Manipuri dance performance traditionally and in Vaishnavite philosophy. A traditional dance style with roots in Manipur's Vaishnavite culture is more than just a show, it is a cultural and spiritual manifestation of the love between Radha and Krishna.

KEYWORDS: *Manipuri Raas Leela, Shutradhari, Vaishnavite Culture, Manipuri Culture*

1. INTRODUCTION
The Manipuri Raas Leela, a classical dance form rooted in the Vaishnavite tradition of Manipur, is not merely a performance but a spiritual and cultural expression of divine love between Radha and Krishna. Central to this highly stylized and symbolic Art form is the presence of the Shutradhari, a vital narrative figure whose role bridges the realms of performance, devotion, and pedagogy.

The Shutradhari frequently makes appearances at the start of Manipuri Raas Leela and at various points throughout the play to introduce characters, clarify plot points, and offer philosophical commentary. The Shutradhari, who is often a man with extensive knowledge of Vaishnavite texts, performs with measured motions, passionate recitations, and a profound sense of devotion. Her role, which embodies the Bhakti ethos that infuses the Raas Leela is devotional and educational rather than theatrical in the traditional dramatic sense. The Shutradhari enhances the audience's comprehension of the divine play (Raas Leela) and its moral and spiritual meaning by its nuanced presence and insightful commentary.

The Shutradhari serves as both a dramaturgical commentator and a heritage spiritual guide in Manipuri Raas Leela, rather than being a narrator in the traditional theatrical sense. Shutradhari enhances the audience's understanding and devotional participation by reciting scripture verses, explaining philosophical intricacies and providing contextual introductions. His melodic and rhythmic interventions, which are frequently given in Manipuri or Sanskrit, are woven across dance scenes to produce a smooth narrative flow. Shutradhari take important role not only in the Manipuri Raas Leela but also in other Vaishnava plays, such as Goura Leela, Udukhol, Gostha Leela.

2. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE
Research on Manipuri Rasa Leela is still somewhat scarce when compared to other forms of Indian classical art. Nevertheless, important contributions have been made by scholars like Singh (1975) contribute the traditional legacy and the beauty of Manipuri Dance. Singh (2002) explores the real Aesthetic of Raas Leela and the Vaishnavite Traditions of Manipur. And Devi (2010) defined the different classical dances of Manipur. These three scholars offer ethnographic and analytical perspectives on the performance structure, ritual context, and the Vaishnavite foundations of this tradition. As noted by Singh (2002), the Shutradhari in Manipuri Rasa Leela takes on a role similar to that of a Guru or Priest, serving as a mediator among the performers, the audience, and the divine.

Kaur (2006) examined the role of music in Raas Leela Performances and analyses the vocalist, musical compositions, instruments, and melodic structures employed in Raas Leela, elucidating how vocalist and instrumentalist enhance the aesthetic experience and narrative expression of this dance form. Devi (2019) offers a comprehensive examination of the musicians and brief elaboration of Shutradhari in the Raas Leela performances. She explores the roles and responsibilities

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of different types of musicians, their improvisational techniques, and their collaborative dynamics with the dancers. Devi (2019) delves into the intricacies of Raas Leela performances, examining aspects such as choreography, music, costumes, and the cultural significance of this dance form within the Manipuri context. This study provides valuable insights into the elements of Raas Leela performance and its role in cultural expression.

3. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Various studies are found conducted in Raas Leela but not hardly any study are found given in debt on the Accompanist. It seems that the experts do not give any emphasis on these vocalist and players who had been playing significant roles in making the Raas Leela a living entity. Each and every performer has its unique role with particular technique to be followed. They all come together to create an enchanting immersive unmortal art form. Scholars wish to draw attention to the significance of Shutradhari take several roles and attention during the Raas Leela performance.

4. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The present proposed study is entitled as "**Shutradhari of Manipuri Raas Leela"**, in this proposed study, important role of Shutradhari will be thoroughly studied. They have the specific legacy that complements the overall aesthetic of the performance. In many of the previous studies conducted by researchers, the Shutradhari of Rass Leela seems to be probably ignored. Therefore, a study on the significant role of Shutradhari in Manipuri Raas Leela is felt needed.

5. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

This paper seeks to explore important role and functions of the Shutradhari in Manipuri Raas Leela, examining her contribution to the narrative structure, religious symbolism and audience reception. The broader framework of Manipuri dance's performance traditions and Vaishnavite philosophy, this study aims to highlight the continued relevance and transformation of this unique narrative device in both traditional and contemporary contexts.

6. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study has adopted Interview and Observation method (both participant and non-participant approaches). This study employs a Qualitative Research Method to explore the cultural significance, language used in the songs of Manipuri Rass Leela by the Shutradhari, and the system of imparting knowledge and skill to be a Shutradhari. Secondary data are collected through library methods; available video records are also referred to collect the requisite data. Some surveys are done with the help of electronic and print media in relation to the study and review of books, magazines, journal, seminar paper, brochures, published material.

1. Shutradhari of Manipuri Raas Leela



Fig.(i)View of Shutradhari with instrumentalist



Fig. (ii) View of Shutradhari with Gopis

(a) Definition and Concepts of Shutradhari

In Manipuri Raas Leela, vocalist is known as 'Shutradhari', who sing the songs in proper episodes of Raas Leela performance. She is an essential character in organising a Raas Leela because of her great role from the beginning to the end. Shutradhari expresses the plot, theme, the atmosphere, the dialogue of the character, narrating the on-going steps of the Rass Leela with the help of songs. Shutradhari has the authority to cover up any gaps in performance by any character of the play with her song/dialogue if needed by chance to hide the mistakes from the audience. Thus, Shutradhari is one of the most important in Manipuri Rass Leela. From the sound and the manner of performance, music can be divided into two classes, as Vocal (sung by mouth) and Instrumental Music. Shutradhari is the vocalist or the playback singer of the Manipuri Raas Leela. The vocalist and the instrumentalist are generally known as Accompanist or Musician. Shutradhari is a Sanskrit word. It consists of two Sanskrit words "Shutra" meaning thread / string and "Dhar" meaning to hold. So, the word Shutradhari means the hand that holds a thread / string. According to the ***Practical Sanskrit English Dictionary*** **(V.S. Apte),** Shutradhari is defined as Sutra - A thread, String line, Cord, Dhar - The thread holder, a stage manager, the principal actor who arranges the cast of characters and instructs them and takes a prominent part in the Prastava (prelude) and again, according to ***A Sanskrit - English Dictionary*** **(Monier-Williams, 1986),** Shutradhari is defined as, Shutra - a thread, yarn, string, line, cord, wire, a measuring line. Dhar - rule or thread holder, an architect, stage manager or principal actor who superintends the whole performance.

From the above observation, it is known that a Shutradhari means the main organiser of Manipuri Raas Leela during the stage performance. In the Sanskrit theatre, the Shutradhar is a very important person and the stage manager of a drama group. In Sanskrit drama, the person who performs Puja (worshipped in the Purvaranga (prelude) part), show dances and sing songs before the beginning of the play is called Shutradhar and has its

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origin in Sanskrit theatre that are found and appear in other Indian theatre under different forms and manners (Devi, 2011). When Sanskrit dramas were on decline, many Indian dramas came into being in India in the Middle Ages. The Shutradhari explains the consummation of Singhar rasa, or sensual and carnal desire, and the service provided to them (Radha and Krishna) by the Sakhis. It also provides the detailed sequences of Raas Leela through songs and slokas.

Therefore, there is some conservation going on in the Raas Leela, through song, commentary, and narration, the Shutradhari provides a thorough understanding of the play and makes it pleasurable. The Shutradhari is crucial to Manipuri Raas Leela; without her assistance, a Raas Leela cannot be planned or carried out. The entire Raas Leela tale, including the ancillary scenes, character identity, chronology and setting. She uses song, sloka, dialogues and singing in Sara (singing sans taal and drum banging) to educate the audience about the play. However, someone with good singing abilities who is ignorant of Raas Leela and does not sing the beautiful melodies of these songs cannot become a Shutradhari. She must therefore possess extensive knowledge and expertise in order to become a Shutradhari. She must also possess certain innate traits. Finally, Shutradhari is one of the Backbone, who holds the cord of the plot of the story.

(b) Methods and Procedure of learning to be a Shutradhari of Manipuri Raas Leela

In the olden days, Manipuri lacked a formal institution to educate dance and music. Most of the learnings were done through Guru Shishya Parampara. Even songs are learnt formally and methodically at a Guru's (teacher's) home with zeal and tenacity. But in the modern days, with the coming up of many dance and music institutions, it can be learned in such institution. Each type of Raas Leela has its own unique aesthetic sense, associated with its theme. Accordingly, the plot also differs from one to another. Therefore, there are various songs in Manipuri Raas Leela. A singer or musician cannot learn these songs all at once, nor can she become a Shutradhari right away. Consequently, one must frequently and minutely attend to learn in depth from a renowned Guru. For inculcating such skill, one needs to spend a significant amount of time in order to become a Shutradhari.

To become a full-fledged Shutradhari, one takes a decade. There are some essential characteristics a student must possess. They are a solid understanding of dance and music, a reasonable command of the language utilised in these Raas Leela songs, accurate pronunciation, knowledge of narration, and storylines associated with the Raas Leela and above all a strong sense of timing and rhythm.

While learning the talent, first, contact a renowned Guru and fixed an auspicious day on which the onset offering has to take place. On such day, the learner offer prayer to Shree-Shree Radha-Govinda. After which she offer Pranalika or Guru Boriba to the particular Instructor/Guru to seek blessings for smooth learning.

On the very first day of learning, it has long been a custom to teach the student at least one song. In the past days, the student would practice singing in the Teacher's spare time. However, nowadays some Gurus dedicate a few hours to teach the pupils daily. It is typical for a student to assist the Guru with household chores as a part of life skill education. Whenever the Guru performed as a Shutradhari, during the learning period, she may make her student as her assistant and provide her the chance and opportunity to observe the event and gain experiential knowledge. The student typically gains a great deal of knowledge and real-world experience when she takes advantage of these opportunities and keeps learning from her Guru.

The Guru permits and declared her as a Shutradhari and also to be teacher in that particular field. After the learner becomes a performer, it has become a custom for the learner to offer a share of her earnings to the Guru from every performance. This trend continues even after she developed into an independent Shutradhari.

(c) The Language of Shutradhari in Manipuri Raas Leela

Shutradhari employs a variety of words, songs, languages and sloka (in Manipuri word Haishak) in Manipuri Raas Leela. Raas Leela was initially performed in Sanskrit language. Later it was changed into Bengali and Brajaboli languages. Accordingly, the languages of Shutradhari followed the suit. Therefore, it is imperative that a Shutradhari of a Raas Leela need to be proficient in Sanskrit, Bengali and Brajaboli languages. However, there has been a great change in the language used by Shutradhari during the reign of Maharaj Churachand (1891-1941). After the King ordered to use Manipuri language for better communication and understanding, almost all the song of Manipuri Raas Leela got translated to Manipuri language and published as a book since in Manipuri language has become more popular. Nowadays, the majority of the songs of Raas Leela performed at other places are sung in Manipuri, with the exception of the Raas Leela offered at the Royal Palace. But there are various difficulties and inconveniences while singing the songs in Manipuri language.

In practical use, the user (singer) encounters some inadequacy and inconvenience in maintaining proper rhythm due to the original word's mal-syllabication. This is because the original (non-Manipuri) words developed some aberrations in pronunciation, taal (rhythm), and tune when translated into Manipuri. However, this may not always present a significant issue. But, the benefit of this conversion is that as most of the Manipuri audience speak Manipuri, they can fully appreciate the song and the play's narrative when it is performed in Manipuri language.

2. CONCLUSION

The importance of the Shutradhari is in maintaining the authenticity and spiritual intent of the Raas Leela is made clear by thematic, functional and historical analyses. The position of Shutradhari is evolving to accommodate both tradition and the demands of contemporary interpretation as performing techniques do. It is imperative that scholars continue to study this figure in order to strengthen the knowledge in the

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performance of Manipuri Raas Leela and to recognise the timeless cultural value of narrative agents in Manipuri Dance traditions.

In the Manipuri Rasa Leela, the Shutradhari plays a crucial but frequently subtle role as the spiritual and narrative thread that unites the devotional, artistic and educational aspects of the performances. The Shutradhari is a cultural mediator who leads both actors and viewers through the holy journey of divine love between Radha and Krishna. It is rooted in the classical Indian dramaturgical tradition but has been specially adapted to the Vaishnavite ethos of Manipur. Her presence turns the Raas Leela into a comprehensive religious experience that is full of theological knowledge, storytelling and symbolism, rather than just a dance play.

The various facets of the Shutradhari function have been investigated in this study, including its historical beginnings during King Bhagyachandra reign, its thematic roles within the Raas Leela framework and its wider relevance within Manipuri cultural identity. In order to contribute to larger conversations on cultural transmission and performative persistence in classical Indian arts, future study may examine how this role changes in diasporic or secular contexts.

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