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ANOTHER PERSPECTIVE ON THE RAAS DANCE OF SHREE SHREE GOVINDAJI

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ABSTRACT
The Raas Dance of Manipur occupies a unique place within India's sacred performing arts, embodying a synthesis of spiritual discipline and the aesthetic experience of divine love. Within the classical tradition, the Govindaji Raas Dance is regarded as an exceptionally refined artistic form through which profound spiritual concepts are communicated. Believed to embody the eternal divine love of Radha and Krishna, the Raas Dance conveys subtle philosophical meanings through intricate movement, gesture, and musical expression. The tradition attained a transformative dimension during the reign of King Bhagyachandra, whose visionary contributions shaped the structural, choreographic, and ritual foundations of the Raas Leela. The present article explores the historical evolution, ritual procedures, musical-literary sources, aesthetic principles, and spiritual foundations of the Raas Dance performed at Shree Shree Govindaji Temple. Special attention is given to the Bhangi Pareng Achouba of Maha Raas, its spiritual significance, and its place within the broader context of Manipuri Vaishnava devotional culture.

KEYWORDS: *Rasa, Song, Rhythm, Raas Dance sequence, Bhangi Pareng, Costume, Ornamentation.*

INTRODUCTION
Manipur has been widely acknowledged as a state of distinctive geographical and cultural identity. Encircled by nine mountain ranges forming a natural protective garland around a central alluvial plain, the region has developed an aesthetic heritage deeply rooted in ritual performance, dance, and music. Manipuri dance forms evolving from primordial ritual practices such as *Lai Haraoba* constitute an ancient system that predates the arrival of Vaishnavism. The introduction of Gaudiya Vaishnavism in the eighteenth century did not interrupt this indigenous cultural flow; rather, it resulted in an extraordinary confluence of older ritual forms and new devotional aesthetics, producing a refined cultural synthesis that endures today.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE
The existing scholarship on Manipuri Raas Leela provides foundational insights into its historical evolution, scriptural grounding, choreographic lineage, and ritual performance structure. Historical documentation from the *Cheitharol Kumbaba* affirms that the consecration of Shree Govinda and the establishment of the Raas Mandal under King Bhagyachandra in 1779 constituted the major turning point in the institutionalization of Raas performance in Manipur (Lairenmayum and Ningthoukhongjam, 1989). Subsequent analyses highlight the role of palace patronage and temple regulation in shaping both repertoire and ritual hierarchy (Rajkumar, 1990).

The theological foundation of Raas Leela is consistently traced to the *Raas Panchadhyaya* of the *Bhagavata Purana*, whose verses inform the devotional mood, lyrical content, and spiritual symbolism of the performance. Scholars have emphasized that the enactment of Madhura Rasa and Navavidha Bhakti forms the core interpretive framework guiding performance aesthetics (Kshetri Mayum Ongbi Gouranishari Devi, 2006).

Choreographically, researchers argue that the movement vocabulary of Raas - particularly the Bhangi Pareng sequences - emerged through a synthesis of pre-Vaishnava Meitei ritual forms such as Lai Haraoba (Shreemoiringthem, 1986). Although these links have been historically asserted, rigorous movement notation and comparative analysis remain limited. The musical dimension, including the integration of Sankirtana traditions, multilingual hymnody, and structured raga–tala sequences, has been described but not analytically correlated with choreographic phrasing (Lairenmayum, 2010).

Across these works, significant gaps remain. The absence of systematic movement analysis, detailed music–dance correlation, ethnographic accounts, and archival source-criticism indicate the need for more interdisciplinary methodologies. The existing literature therefore provides a descriptive foundation but leaves substantial scope for analytical, performance-based, and historically triangulated research.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY
This study holds significance for its contribution to the critical understanding of Manipuri Raas Leela, particularly the Maha Raas and its associated choreographic, musical, and ritual structures. Despite the long-standing cultural prominence of Raas in Manipur, systematic academic analyses integrating historical sources, scriptural references, choreographic vocabulary, and musical frameworks remain limited. By synthesizing textual evidence, traditional performance

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protocols, and movement-based inquiry, this research addresses a major scholarly gap that has left the structural, aesthetic, and devotional dimensions of Raas insufficiently theorized.

The study is also significant for its role in documenting and interpreting traditions that are at risk due to rapid socio-cultural change, declining transmission practices, and limited archival preservation. Through the examination of Bhangi Pareng Achouba and related sequences, the research provides an evidence-based foundation for conserving embodied knowledge that is rarely codified in written form.

Furthermore, the study contributes to broader academic discourses in dance studies, performance theory, cultural anthropology, and Vaishnava aesthetics. It offers a model for interdisciplinary approaches that link textual hermeneutics with performative analysis, thereby advancing scholarly understanding of how devotional narratives are translated into embodied expression. The findings are expected to support future research, policy-making in heritage conservation, and pedagogical development in classical Manipuri dance.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

In ***"Another Perspective on the Raas Dance of Shree Shree Govindaji,"*** the central problem addressed is the lack of scholarly examination that presents alternative viewpoints on the choreographic, musical, and ritual dimensions of the Govindaji Raas tradition, leading to an incomplete academic understanding of its cultural and devotional significance.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A qualitative research methodology was adopted to investigate the Raas Dance of Shree Shree Govindaji from an alternative interpretive viewpoint. The study was grounded in textual and archival analysis, drawing upon primary sources such as *Cheitharol Kumbaba*, Vaishnava scriptures, and traditional Raas manuscripts, along with secondary scholarly works. Non-participant observation of selected Raas performances was undertaken to document ritual procedures, musical structures, and choreographic sequences in their authentic settings. Informal consultations with practitioners- including Brahmin priests, Pala singers, and dance teachers were used to clarify performance conventions and ritual protocols. All collected data were interpreted through a hermeneutic analytical lens, enabling the symbolic, devotional, and aesthetic dimensions of the Raas tradition to be examined holistically.

Early Hindu Influence and the Emergence of Vaishnavism in Manipur

Historical records indicate that the worship of Vishnu images began in Manipur during the reign of King Meidingu Kyamba (1467–1508). Subsequent rulers, including Maharaja Charairongba (1697–1709) and Maharaja Garibniwaz (1709–1748), expanded the presence of Hindu deities and ritual practices in the region. However, it was under King Meidingu Rajarshi Bhagyachandra (1763–1798) that Gaudiya Vaishnavism became firmly rooted.

Following divine instructions received in a dream, Bhagyachandra commissioned seven sacred idols carved from jackfruit wood at Kaina - Govinda, Vijoy Govinda, Anuprabhu, Madan Mohan, Nitai Nanda, Advaita, and Gopinath - an event documented in the *Cheitharol Kumbaba* (Lairenmayum & Ningthoukhongjam, 1989).

A translated passage notes that the consecration of Shree Govinda in 1779 at Langthabal was accompanied by five days of Raas performances, marking the institutionalization of Raas Leela within the royal tradition. This period established Raas performance as a central feature of Manipuri devotional life.

Institutionalization of Raas Leela under King Bhagyachandra

Establishment of the Raas Mandal and First Performances-
King Bhagyachandra introduced the three principal forms of Raas—Maha Raas, Kunja Raas, and Basanta Raas that based on the divine directions he received, initiating the tradition with the establishment of Nata Sankirtana and the first Raas Leela performed by seven maidens embodying the Gopis. In the generations that followed, subsequent rulers continued to expand and refine the tradition: Maharaja Chandrakirti instituted the Nitya Raas, while Maharaja Churachand introduced the Diva Raas as a daytime variant. Through these successive royal contributions, the Raas tradition gradually evolved into five principal forms, each integrated into the ritual, seasonal, and aesthetic framework of Manipuri Vaishnava culture.

Seasonal and Ritual Alignment of the Five Raas

1. Maha Raas is performed on the night of Mera Waphukpa (the full-moon night of Mera (October–November).
2. Kunja Raas is performed on the night of Mera Wakhinba (the new-moon night of Mera (October–November).
3. Basanta Raas is performed on the night of Sajibu Purnima ("the full-moon day of Sajibu (March–April).
4. Nitya Raas is performed throughout various months. (However, it is not played during the autumn and spring seasons.)
5. Diva Raas is a Raas Leela performed during the daytime. It may be presented in different months, depending on the occasion.

Only *Maha Raas*, *Kunja Raas*, and *Basanta Raas* require formal sanction from the Shree Govindaji Temple Board and are performed exclusively within the temple mandap.

Preparatory Rituals for Jagoi Raas

Selection of Gopis-
The initiation of Jagoi Raas begins with the selection of the participating Gopis, conducted one month before the full-moon performance, under the guidance of the *Panji Sanglakpa* (astrologer).

Ritual Sequence Prior to Performance

- Opening of the Mani Mandir
- Panchadev Puja conducted by Brahmins
- Reading of *gotra* and names of the principal dancer (Lalita)
- Offering of *Vartana* to Radha Govinda
- Distribution of *prasaad*

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Rituals on the Day of Performance

- Raseshwori and Govinda proceed to the Bhadrachakra
- Wearing of Raas costumes inside the Mandali
- Pre-performance *aarti* by Brahmins
- Traditional *Arangpham* rituals and *Lei-Chandon*
- Formal commencement of Jagoi Raas

Since Radha Govinda is already present, Krishna Abhisar is omitted, and the performance begins with Gopi Abhisar, followed by Prarthana, Gopi Entry, Vangi Pareng, and concludes with Pushpanjali.

Structure of Raas Performance

During the performance, dance, music, rhythm, instruments, costume, ornamentation, and offerings form a unified aesthetic system. The Sankirtana songs are sung in a devotional Raasa mood, and languages include Sanskrit, Bengali, and Brajabali.

Approximate Sequence of Raas Leela

1. Pungi Raga Macha
2. Shutradhari Raga
3. Raga Taba (Guru Vandana, Sabha Vandana, Vrindavan Barnan)
4. Krishna Abhisar and Murali Naad
5. Arrival of Radhika and Gopis
6. Prayers by the Sakhis
7. Jagoi Mapop
8. Bhangi Pareng Achouba
9. Krishna Nartan
10. Radha Nartan
11. Pushpanjali, Jugol Prarthana
12. Final *aarti* by Brahmins

Literary and Scriptural Sources of Raas Leela

The songs in the Raas Leela are drawn from authoritative Vaishnava texts such as:

- *Shree Shree Raaspanchadhyay*
- *Gita Govinda*
- *Padakalpataru*
- *Vaishnava Padavali*

The *Raas Panchadhyaya* (Bhagavata Purana, Book 10, Chapters 29–33) is regarded as the soul of Krishna's Raas Leela. The 19th verse of the Gopi Geet is especially revered.
A notable verse used in Maha Raas is:
"Drishta Kumubanta Makhanda Mangdalang Ramanabhang Naba…"

Bhangi Pareng Achouba: A Core Aesthetic Expression
Origin and Development-

Bhangi Pareng Achouba is attributed to King Bhagyachandra, who adapted elements from earlier Meitei dances.
Examples:

- *Champra Oakpi* and *Champra Khaybi* – from Panthoibi's gestures in Lai Haraoba
- *Lashing Kappi* and *Lashing Manbi* – from Laibou Phisha
- *Ghat Taba* and *Chana Leibi* – from Laibangthou Lainura Shannaba

The dance is considered indispensable; without it, a performance cannot be designated Raas Leela.

Textual Invocation from Raas Panchadhyaya

The Bhangi Pareng Achouba in Maha Raas invokes verses from the fifth chapter of *Raas Panchadhyaya*: "Padaniyasheirabhujabidutibi: Shammiteirbrabilashei…"
These verses (8–17) are sung by the Shutradhari.

Spiritual Interpretation

According to Sabita Sen Mehta, Princess Sija Laioibi was the first to dance the Bhangi Achouba during the Abhishek ceremony of Govindaji, consecrating herself as Raseshwori—the soul of Raas.

Philosophical Dimensions of Raasa and Bhakti

Raas Leela embodies the supreme aesthetic-spiritual play of Krishna with the Gopis who themselves emerge from Krishna's own being. Vaishnava theology classifies bhakti into **Navavidha Bhakti**, all of which are believed to reside fully in Shreemati Radhika. Chaitanya Deva revered Krishna in Radha-bhava, elevating Madhura Rasa as the highest form of divine love. As Shree Chitreswor Sharma explains, Jagoi Raas represents the pure service of Krishna through sakhi-manjari bhava, reaching the pinnacle of *Raga Marga Bhakti*.

CONCLUSION

The Raas Dance of Shree Shree Govindaji Temple constitutes one of the most sophisticated expressions of Manipuri devotional aesthetics. Integrating ritual, music, literature, philosophy, and refined movement vocabulary, it stands as a living tradition shaped by centuries of spiritual practice and artistic evolution. The Bhangi Pareng Achouba, in particular, epitomizes the convergence of indigenous Meitei movement heritage and Vaishnava devotional metaphysics, reflecting the essence of Raasa, the eternal play of divine love.

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