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A Full Moon Light Night and Mystic Love Affairs of Ras Lila in Sylhet: An Anthropological Study on the Manipuri Ethnic Community, Bangladesh

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Abstract

Manipuri community is a prominent ethnic group in Sylhet region, Bangladesh and over one and a half century, it represents a mystical and colorful historical and traditional culture, customs and heritage. Ras Lila is a most important cultural and religious phenomenon of Manipuri which has not been popularly discussed among the scholars. This paper attempts to understand and describe the 'Ras Lila mela', and to present its essence, internal meaning, collective importance, social connection and the hidden realm of festival on their whole life through several round of direct observations. Ras Lila is performed on 'Purnima Tithi' (holy time) which represents the transcendent metaphysical love of Radha and Krishna and Gopi's devotion. It is not only a dance a most optimistic folk dance but also represents the creation of the universe, cosmic love and lyrics; represents the energy of life, the root of all creation; 'Purusha' and 'Prakriti' - male and female energy

Keywords: Sylhet, Manipuri community, Ras Lila dance, mystic love, mystic culture.

1. Introduction: 'Ras Lila' means the play of Lord Krishna where 'Ras' means artistic, the essence of love and 'Lila' means play. It is a dance of 'divine love'. 'Ras' comes from a Sanskrit word 'Rasa'. Lord Krishna performed 'Rasa Lila'. This theme was coming from Krishna's unfaithfulness to Radha, her forgiveness and their reunion, the concord and delightful agreement between Krishna and Radha. It takes place one night when the gopis (a group of cow herding girls) associate to Radha or milk-maid of Vrindavan (a place in which lord Krishna spent his childhood days) upon hearing the sound of Krishna's flute, sneak away from their households and families to the forest to dance with Krishna throughout the night, which Krishna supernaturally stretches to the length of one Night of Brahma. In the Bhagavata Purana it is stated that whoever faithfully hears or describes the Ras Lila attains Krishna's pure loving devotion (Suddha-bhakti) (Schweig, 2005).

In Manipuri communities 'Ras Lila' is a very important festival and religious feeling of the Manipuri have better reflected through this festival. It reveals the sublime of metaphysical love of *Radha* and *Krishna* and of *Gopi's* devotion to *Krishna*, the full incarnation of God. According to Manipuri Pandits, it is an attachment of the outward soul (*Jivatma*) to the supreme soul (*Paramatma*). The outline of *Ras Lila* is the eco of the flute of *Krishna* hearing which the *gopies* (milk-maids) got into a disorder. All major festivals and rituals among the Manipuri community are connected with Hinduism, particularly with the cult of Vaishnavism (Sheram, 1994). The finest product of the fusion of Bengali Vaishnavism is beautiful *Rasa Nritya* (dance).

Shreram (1994) in his book "*Bangladesher Manipuri: Troie Sanskritir Tribeni Sangame*" expressed about the history, origin and cultural milieu of Manipuri community and explain the particular meaning of their religion, ritual, dance as well as literature. He also mentioned the meaning and stages of their greatest festival 'Ras Lila'. The limitation of this study is that the writer was from the Manipuri Meithei Community and his study was biased towards the community. Though the writer mentions some issues about another part, Manipuri Bishnupriya Community, the book presents the Meithei Ras Lila and other festivals. Paul (1990:83) talks about the diversity and multiculturalism of Manipuri dances, especially Ras Lila. She expressed the Ras dances according to the religious, historical and spiritual insights and view (Paul, 1990b).

2. Methodology: Researcher gathered information over a year from 2011 to 2012. A field study was conducted through several rounds of visits and direct observation of the festival spots from *Maharas* to final *Ras Purnima* (full moon) night. In addition, the information was collected from 10 elderly people who were able provide detailed information about *Ras Lila* through a general interview guideline. The respondents were selected with the help of Manipuri community leaders with a specific intent of sampling from different socioeconomic class and age groups. The research was conducted by using the general interview guideline on Ras Lila. In this study, Ras Lila dance and cultural contents are highlighted, including the eternal essence, internal meaning and social importance of love. The respondents were asked about the stage-wise Rasa and its consequences and universal love of *Radha and Krishna*. Besides this, informal discussion, conversation and group discussion has been done with religious priest including men and women.

3. History of Manipuri Community and Ras Lila: The Manipuri are believed to be descendants of the *Gandarvas*, the dancers and musicians of the heavenly court of Lord *Indra*. Lord *Shiva* and Goddess *Parvati* are said to have danced in the valley of Manipur accompanied by the *Gandarvas*. The performance was lifted up by the *mani* or jewel on the head of the serpent *Athshesha* (thousand headed serpent on which Lord *Vishnu* reposes). That is how Manipuri got its name. The ancient Manipuri had its own thought and philosophy, own Gods and priests, own rites and festivals which preserved a religious value in mythology and colorful rituals. The Manipuri religion is said to be the oldest religion in South- East Asia. Early Manipuri were devotees of supreme Almighty God '*Lainingthou Soralel*' following the *Laining-Lichat* (foot print) of Godly ancestors. The religious life of

the people, even when they have come much under the influence of Hinduism, retains many characteristics inherited from their pre-historic ancestors (Tripurāri, 1994).

The members belong to Bishnupriya (one of the ethnic sect of Manipuri) consider themselves to be the genuine Vedic decent, who, according to them, came to Manipur valley from Dvaraka and Hastinapura, just after the Mahabharata war, which was happening before the 9th century B.C. Indo-Vedic and Mongoloid people lived side by side in Manipur for centuries. Now it assembled in her the major folks of the east and the west - the Meitei and the Bishnupriya Manipuri (Paul, 1990a).

The Meithei (another ethnic sect of Manipur), on the other hand, differentiate themselves as descendants of Mongoloid group of people. But some of *Meitei* Manipuri believes that they are the descendants of people coming from *Mithila* (Videha) which is the eastern frontier of Aryan culture for a long time. Another argument is that the *Meithei* Manipuri moved in this place from Chinese territory and this is reflected in the name. *Meithei* means, in Chinese, 'people of this country' i.e., Chinese territory. Dalton in his book "Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal", states that, "...And, this hordes over run a country (Manipur) that has been previously occupied by the people of Aryan blood known in the western India and to the Bards" (Dalton, 1872). However, Brown says "although the general facial characteristics of the Mannipurie are of Mongolian type, there is great diversity of features among them, some of them showing regularly approaching the Aryan type"(Cotton, Burn & Meyer, 1908, in Imperial gazetteer of India, p. 126).

Manipuri settled in Bangladesh since 18th century. According to historical report, after the '*Brahma War*', many Manipuri rebel left the Manipur state and settled in Cachar, Srikhatya (Sylhet) and Tripura state. Hamilton mentioned that, in 1768, when Burmese captured the Manipur, about 3,00,000 Manipuri people left Manipur and settled in Assam, Cachar, Sylhet (Hamilton & Nhuyan, 1940).

Ras Lila performed both by the Meithei and Bishnupriya Manipuri people. The king of Manipur Maharaj Bhagyachandra (1763-1798) introduced Manipuri Ras Lila to Manipuri community and from the time the Ras Lila became the most important part of Manipuri culture. Rajrishi Bhagyachandra Maharaj found the image (Darshan) of the Almighty Lord Shree Krishna in his dream in the most beautiful and special dress, more suitable for the softest dance. The Lord is in his *Natabar* dress and flute in his hand, and top-knot (*chura*) of peacock feather is on his head. The union (*Jugal Murti*) of Lord Krishna and *Srimati Radhika* was seen in his future vision. After that, he had his dream to make true and with his aspiration he resolved to worship Lord Shree Krishna performing the 'Ras Lila' dances which he had seen in his dream. Then Rajrishi began to worship the lord with his consort in the Royal Palace. Then Rajrishi tried his dream of Rasa dance to be a living legend and taking essence of the twenty-ninth to the thirty-third chapters of Shrimad Bhagavata Darshan which are known as a Raspanchadhyaya. In 1779, he established a Govindhaji temple and organizes a Ras Lila in Bengali *Kartik* (November in English Calendar) month. Then it was spread out to the Cachar and another Manipuri inherited place (Sharma, 1960).

The Manipuri Maharas, the yearly festival is being observed by the Bangladeshi Manipuri since 1845. As per the records maintained by the authorities, the first Maha-Ras ever held outside Manipur, was at *Madhabpur Juramandav* in 1842. This festival has been observed in cooperation at *Madhabpur Juramandav* in *Kamalganj upaziala* of *Moulvibazar* district of Bangladesh. Ras Lila was also observed in some other different places like at *Tetaigoan* in *Adampur*, *Jayashree* in *Hobiganj* and *Paruwa* in *Sunamganj* district. Thousands of people irrespective of religious identity joined the festival. A Manipuri handloom fair was also held in front of *Juramandav* (Schweig, 2005).

Ras Lila performance enchanted the world poet Rabindranath Tagore in 1919. On 6 November in this year, Rabindranath had a visit in the Bishnupriya Manipuri village of *Machampur*, a remote village not far away from the town situated on the bank of the river *Surma*, Sylhet. He was given a warm reception there from the Bishnupriya Manipuri people. He was so impressed after seeing a dance composition, the *Goshtha Lila* presented by the *Bishnupriya* Manipuri women. Tagore intended to bring the dance teacher to his idyllic institute, *Shantiniketon* located in Calcutta, India. On 6 November 1919, in the speech in a historical gathering of students at Sylhet M.C. College Hall, Rabindranath mentioned about his experience in *Machampur* and the Bishnupriya Manipuri people. Manipuri dance also remained unknown to the rest of India till Rabindranath Tagore appreciates its merit and made it known to all. Since that time Manipuri dance began to attract attention and gain popularity. Today Manipuri is highly appreciated in all parts of India and Bangladesh (Sharma, 1960).

4. Ras Lila: the Finest Product of Manipuri Culture: Manipuri dances can be divided into two categories, classical and folk. *Rasa Nritya* falls into the classical group and is essentially of *lasya* (gentle) form. Folk dances are ‘Thabalchongba’, ‘Laiharaoba’, ‘Khamba Thoibi’, ‘Kortal Cholom’, ‘Mridang Cholom’, Naga dance etc. The full moon day, the Ras Leela of Radha- Krishna was held with the most enthusiastic mood of the religious people of Manipur. From the religious point of view and from the artistic vision, it can be said that the Manipuri classical dance, the Radha-Krishna Ras Lila is one of the most modest, softest and mildest but the most meaningful dances of the world, in relation to its highest form of *Sudha Swatic Gunas* (Pure qualities of the Lord) (Sanajaoba, 1993).

There is no restriction of the duration of the performance. The *Guru (Rasdhari)* and *Sutrodhari* (chorus) should take as much time as they wish, it is necessary for arousing the feeling of *Rasa*, *Raga*, *Anuraga*, *Bhava*, *Bibhava* etc within the hearts of the gopies as well as in the hearts of the audience. Based on above mentioned issues, there are some Ras dances as following (Sheram, 1994):

Maharas: This is performed in the full moon day (*puṛnima tithi*) of the month of *Kartik* (October-November) based on *Shrimad Bhagavata Panchyayadhya*.

Kunja Ras: This is performed in the full moon day of the month of *Agrahayan* (November-December) based on *Brahma Beibarta Purana*.

Basanta Ras: It is performed in the full moon day of the month of *Falgun* (April) and *Chaitra* (May) based on *Govinda Lila Amrita*.

Nitya Ras: It can be played on any auspicious night based on Govinda Lila Amrita. It was firstly introduced by Srijut Chandrakirti Maharaj.

Diba Ras: Sometimes, this Ras is called Beliras. This Ras can be played in all month on any auspicious day based on Govinda Lila Amrita.

Ras Purnima: Ras Purnima is one of the prime portions of Ras Lila. Anybody can do Ras Lila in anytime, but Ras purnima is organized on a certain date of purnima tithi (November-December). Ras purnima is the most attractive play among all Ras Lila.

4.1. Dress Pattern of Ras Lila: In the Ras dance, Radha and Gopies dresses are called *Pothleay*. Gopies usually wear red dress, Radha stands out in green attire and male dancer Krishna wears a saffron dress. Radha's overall dress is a thin transparent scarf covered on the face is *Meaikhum*. Fashionable gold lace and small glasses are hanged on the shoulder beside the left into right side which is called *Khaun*. Red or green color large petticoat is names as *Kumin*. Behind the kumin, white color small petticoat is hanging on the knee which is called as *Pashvan*.

Krishna's dress is called as *Krishnoghi Fhijathe*. Yellow cloth is wearing folded into a tuck as like Bengali calls as *Sona Fhijathe*. Holy thread *Nogun* and *Kocknam* are low in *Laitai* which is residing the head crest and on the top peacock groom (Singh, 2011).

There are some ornaments they use in their Rasa dance both by Radha and Krishna. They are *Lick* (necklace), *Kundor Nine* (ear ring); on the elbow, the gold lace ornament is *Tall*. *Paamban Khongci* is residing around on the finger and wrist, anklet name is *Khongci*, name of ring are *Khudhop* and *Tanthak* is residing on the right *Taal*.

4.2 Dance and Lyrics of Ras lila: The dance requires eight people, Krishna, Radha and six Gopies. Sometimes, eight Gopies play to two child stars (Krishna and Radha) (Schweig, 2005). Typical Ras Lila includes the following steps –

1. Krishna Abhisar
2. Radha-Gupi Abhisar
3. Arrangement of Mondob
4. Rag-Alap of Gupis
5. Achouba Vongipareng
6. Krishna Nartan
7. Radha Nartan
8. Different kind of Dances of the Gopis

The technique of Manipuri dancing is based on an interesting principle of compensatory movement and avoiding any jerks, sharp edges or straight lines. The movement is very grandeur and beautiful. The right hand is outstretched towards the right. The movement towards the right has been balanced and subdued by one towards the left. The body is tilted towards the left in order to offset the right side thrust. This particularly contrasts with the technique of *Bharata Natyam*. The fixation of the eyes is to the point of the tips of fingers. The feet never strike the ground with a sound impact, as this would interfere with the delicate flow of the body movements. The artist never looks at any person or audience as a

mark of concentration to the Lord surrounding the outward world and illusion of Maya. The steps are very much acute and complex (Prasad, 1941).

Timing is kept on the *Mridang* (one type of traditional musical instrument) which is accompanied by 'Kartal' and 'Mandira'. The faint sweet notes of the bamboo flute and singing make a charming melody. The dance conveys their sentiments and emotion through the wonderful supple movement of the body.

The Mudras or hand movement in Manipuri dance are quite different from other classical dance. Some O-songyukta (single hand) mudras are potaka, tripotaka, ordhopotaka, olopollob, bhruksa, anugush, kurak, mushti etc. and some songyukta (double handed) mudras are sangkha, charka, onjoli, pushpaput, kukil, shoshtik, shook etc.

The art-loving people of Manipuri community accomplish all of their rituals relating to Shree Krishna by dance lyrics along with prayers. The various lifetime activities of Sree Krishna are represented through dance lyrics in association of religious book and literature. The lyrics of the songs among the Bishnupriya and Meithei Manipuri are totally different in the Ras Lila. The Meithei Manipuri sing their songs in Meithei language and the Bishnupriya Manipuri sing their songs in Bangla and Bishnupriya language, but their song theme is same (Tripurāri, 1994).

4.3. Music and Ras Lila: The Manipuri Nat Sankirtana is a complete self-sufficient music tradition in the most comprehensive sense of the term. The Ras tradition and Nat Sankirtana system going hand in glove has tremendous implications. The Nat music Raagas, raaginis, talas and rasas taken together give it not only the appearance but also the actual status of a classical music tradition. Bhagyachandra has to be given the full credit of the laying of the foundation of such a system. Nat Sankirtana has the pung, the duhar cholom and the costume over the above the Rasa sung in the system. At present, the Nat Sankirtana has a vast and variegated subject with so many departments for each of which the artist have to give lifelong devotion for attainment of a semblance of mastery. No artist in any department can claim comprehensive demand on the department. The Nata Sankirtana as a whole is naturally too vast and complicated as a subject for any student, researcher or academia. He or she has to be specializing in one or the other department of which his or her mastery would be just touching the fringe of the subject after a lifelong devotion. Humility and self-abnegation are spontaneous expressions that come to the learners in the field of Nat Sankirtana. King Bhagyachandra took pains to set the classical dance such masterly, ability and vision that with passing years the trend became stronger (Schweig, 2005).

Recognition of the Ras Lila should be naturally implied as a trend of classical discipline expressed in the Manipuri Nata Sankirtana. But this is not enough. Ras Lila in its full dress is not a daily or as a frequent occasion. The Nat Sankirtana from which the Ras materials are gathered and on the basis of which the Ras dances and music are composed is almost a daily affair. The Manipur socio-religious and cultural life is unimaginable without Nat Sankirtana. The art form is thus socially patronized with an element of social compulsion encouraging and ensuring upcoming of performing artists from generation to generation.

Bhagyachandra's successors followed him in this regard. Within the framework of the tradition, each king contributed to the enrichment of the tradition. Manipuri Ras styles as well as Nat Sankirtana have been subjected to creative renovations in the process of the organic growth so far. King Bhgachandra however, remains the principal root of this growth. He acting as a viceroy of Shri Govindaje, his crown prince, Senapati and other leading figures in his administration were put in charge of important deities under whose umbrella they in their turn function (Prasad, 1941).

The *Bhakti* oriented Manipuri *kirtans* makes use of six *Ragas* and thirty-six *Raginis* as set forth in the Govinda Lilamrita and Sangit-Damodara. Then the sequences such as *Vridadevi's* arrangement of Kunjo, arrival of Krishna, arrivals of Radha and the Gopi's at the appointed place, Krishna's disappearance from the company of *Gopi's*, *Krishna's* separation from Radha, Radha searching for the Lord through emotional songs, reappearance of Krishna and the Gopi's Prem-Seba to him, questionings of Gopi's to Krishna and his answer, Krishna dance with Gopi's and lastly the Gopi's return to their homes at the end of the night were performed in due order (Prasad, 1941).

The *Gopies* are involved with singing, speaking and dancing. The singing is in unison, it consists of solo, duet and chorus which are alternated and interchanged frequently. The Sutradharis sing mainly the arias of Radha in the background. The languages of the songs are mainly in Sanskrit, Maithili, Brajabuli and Bengali though few of them are composed in Bishnupriya Manipuri Language. The *Oja* said that the songs of Ras are set in Tintal (7 Beats and 3 Stresses), Tanchep (3 Beats and 1 Stress) and Menkup (3 Beats and 2 Stresses) in succession. There are also 64 variations of Sringars, the sentiment of love in consonance with the Ras theory of Manipuri Vaishnavs. The dance form has a well-confined and definite technique based on principles laid down by tradition. Closely related to the dance are the Parengs (series). The common parts among Parengs are Vrindavan Pareng, Khurumba Pareng and Bhangi which are classical compositions of dedicated Gurus. The tradition is while presenting a Pareng the audience that cannot leave the place till the presentation is completed.

The Ras ended with the 'Arati' in which the whole audience stands up and takes part. Flaming trays of Candles and *Agarbatis* were brought into the arena before Radha and Krishna. The Gopies run their hands over the fire and touching their faces. The audience, with the sentiment of the religious devotion, is seems to be satisfied fully appreciating and drinking the nectar of Radha-Krishna Love, some of them are found shedding tears. They took the dusts of the feet of the Gopies and flowers from the Ras-Mondoli as sacred objects and place them on their heads.

5. Conclusion: Ras Lila is not only religious practice of the Manipuri community, but it plays a dominant role in their social life style. Ras Lila has great social importance not only in the Manipuri community but whole universe also. It is not only a dance, it represents the creation of the universe. Ras Lila also represents the energy of life and the root of all creation. In reality, Krishna does not dance as a mere Krishna; he represents himself, the

whole of the male element in creation, known in Sanskrit as *Purusha*, and similarly the gopis represent the entire female element, *Prakriti*. The Ras Lila represents the combined dance of *Prakriti* and *Purusha*. It is the dance of the meeting of the male and female energies, of *Purusha* and *Prakriti*. It represents the mighty cosmic dance. For this reason, that is a single Krishna dances with any number of gopis. Generally, it is not possible for a single man dance with many women at a time. No man can be in love with many women together, but Krishna does it, and does it beautifully. It is amazing that every milkmaid, every gopi is taking part in Ras Lila, believes that Krishna is dancing with her, that he is hers. It seems Krishna has turned into a thousand Krishnas, so that he pairs off with each of the thousand women present there. Krishna is not a person here; he represents the great male energy, *Purusha*. Man cannot alone flow, he needs the presence of a woman. Without the woman, man is inhibited and closed. In the same way, without man the woman is inhibited and closed. Their energies are springing into the form of love. And this love can have great spiritual significance.

People from all walks of life, the young, the olds and even the children wait for this day. The realization about the Ras Lila differs from people of one-age-group to another. The older think of how this Ras can be matched up with Ras of Bhagavan Sree Krishna. The little children find this day to be about eating and buying toys. The young people consider this as a day of union with former friends and of getting met with the desired girl. This is particularly a day to introduce the Manipuri to the entire world.

The people of Manipuri get together at the program of Ras Lila and this brings unity among them. It is not only important for the ritual appearance, but to how a group of people or a community response to an unknown metaphor also. In Manipuri community, people are attached to this ritual and it is changing over time in one hand and is shaping the other. This cultural response investigation will help to make a future direction of the unseen and non-experienced metaphoric supervision.

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