



SACRED RITUALS AND OFFERINGS IN BASANTA RAAS PERFORMANCE

Rajkumari Jiteshwori¹, Dr. P. Lilabati Devi²

¹Research Scholar, Department of Dance & Music, Manipur University, Canchipur

²Assistant Professor, S-3, Department of Dance & Music, Manipur University, Canchipur

Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.36713/epra25685>

DOI No: 10.36713/epra25685

ABSTRACT

Basanta Raas Leela is a prominent cultural and spiritual performance in Manipur, celebrated during the spring season, specifically on the full moon night of Sajibu (Cheitra). This vibrant dance form, deeply rooted in Gaudiya Vaishnavism, depicts the divine interactions between Lord Krishna and the gopis, emphasizing themes of love, joy, and forgiveness. Introduced by King Bhagyachandra Maharaj in the 18th century, Basanta Raas Leela integrates elements from significant texts such as the Brahma Baibrata Puran and Geet Govinda of Shri Jayadeva Mahakavi. Incorporating ideas from works like Padakalapataru, Sangeet Madhaba, and Raas Ullasantantra, the performance showcases intricate choreography and lyrical beauty, elevating the narrative to a transcendent experience. Even while enacting parts of the Shrimad Bhagavata, certain episodes are thoughtfully omitted, allowing for a focused exploration of love and longing. The performance not only serves as a festive celebration but also acts as a medium for expressing devotion, fostering community engagement, and reinforcing the spiritual bonds among participants and spectators. Unique features of Basanta Raas include episodes like Abher Khel, where Krishna joyfully plays with colors, and Radha Maan, which highlights the emotional dynamics between Krishna and Radha. These narratives enrich the cultural tapestry of Manipur, reflecting its historical and religious evolution. By presenting a vivid portrayal of divine love and devotion, Basanta Raas Leela plays a crucial role in preserving Manipuri cultural heritage, promoting a sense of identity, and ensuring the continuity of traditional practices. As a dynamic expression of faith, it underscores the importance of cultural rituals in enhancing communal harmony and spiritual enrichment.

KEYWORDS: Gaudiya Vaishnavism, Divine Love, Cultural Heritage, Bhakti

OBJECTIVE

The primary objective of this paper is to explore and elucidate its significance within the Manipuri tradition as a multifaceted cultural and spiritual performance. Specifically, the study aims to:

1. Investigate the historical origins of Basanta Raas Leela.
2. Analyze Performance Structure of Basanta Raas Leela.
3. Showcase about the krom (sequence) of Basanta Raas Leela.
4. To explore about the seating hierarchy in the Raas Mandali.
5. Explain about the costume of Basanta Raas Leela.

INTRODUCTION

Basanta Raas Leela is a cherished cultural performance rooted in the Manipuri tradition, encapsulating the rich tapestry of spiritual devotion, community participation, and artistic expression. This vibrant dance-drama celebrates the divine love between Shrimati Radhika and Lord Shri Krishna, intertwining themes of joy, longing, and the perennial cycles of nature. The performance is typically held during the spring season, coinciding with the festival of Holi, which marks not only the arrival of spring but also the triumph of love and joy over despair. The significance of Basanta Raas Leela extends beyond mere entertainment; it serves as a ritual that reinforces communal bonds and cultural identity among the people of Manipur. The roots of Basanta Raas Leela

lie within the broader Vaishnavite tradition, which venerates Lord Shri Krishna as the supreme deity. In this context, the performance becomes a medium through which the narratives of Krishna's playful exploits with the gopis (cowherd maidens) are brought to life. These stories are not merely tales of romance; they symbolize the soul's quest for union with the divine, reflecting deeper philosophical and theological themes. The colorful and dynamic nature of the Raas Leela mirrors the vitality of spring, embodying the spirit of renewal and rebirth that characterizes the season. At its core, Basanta Raas Leela is a communal affair. It brings together individuals from diverse backgrounds to participate in a shared cultural experience, fostering a sense of unity and collective identity. The performance is a space where traditional values are celebrated, stories are passed down through generations, and the community's spirit is uplifted. Through elaborate choreography, vibrant costumes, and melodious music, participants and audiences alike are drawn into a world where the sacred and the playful coexist harmoniously. Moreover, the ritualistic elements of Basanta Raas Leela enrich the performance, transforming it into a sacred act of devotion. Before the performance begins rituals such as prayers and offerings are made to seek divine blessings, highlighting the spiritual significance embedded within the artistic expression. The use of traditional instruments, including the Manipuri Pung and



Moibung (conch), creates a captivating auditory experience that resonates deeply with the audience, enhancing the overall ambiance of the performance. The symbolism inherent in Basanta Raas Leela is profound. The interplay of colors during the Holi festival serves as a reminder of the joy and vitality of life, while also encouraging the breaking down of social barriers. In this celebratory context, individuals engage in the playful throwing of colors, embodying the themes of love, camaraderie, and the shared human experience. The performance becomes a vehicle for expressing both individual and collective identities, bridging the past and present in a seamless continuum of cultural heritage. As we delve deeper into the various dimensions of Basanta Raas Leela, we will explore its historical origins, the intricacies of its performance, and the community dynamics that shape its significance in contemporary Manipuri society. This exploration will reveal how Basanta Raas Leela not only preserves traditional values but also adapts to the changing cultural landscape, ensuring its continued relevance and vibrancy in the lives of the Manipuri people. Through this lens, we can appreciate the multifaceted nature of this performance, recognizing it as a vital expression of spiritual devotion, artistic creativity, and communal harmony.

Basanta Raas Leela: A Detailed Exploration

Basanta Raas Leela is an exquisite performance art form deeply embedded in Manipuri culture, intertwining themes of love, spirituality, and community. Rooted in the traditions of the Vaishnavite sect, it primarily celebrates the divine relationship between Lord Shri Krishna and Shrimati Radhika, emphasizing the joyful and playful aspects of their love. This detailed exploration will cover the historical context, performance structure, cultural significance, and contemporary relevance of Basanta Raas Leela. The origins of Basanta Raas Leela can be traced back to the Bhakti movement in India, particularly within the Vaishnavite tradition that flourished in the 15th to 17th centuries. This movement emphasized personal devotion to God, often expressed through poetry, music, and dance. In Manipur, the performance evolved as a way to narrate the divine pastimes (leelas) of Krishna, with a specific focus on the spring season, symbolizing renewal and joy. The term "Raas" refers to the playful dance of Lord Shri Krishna and the Gopis, while "Basanta" signifies spring. Thus, Basanta Raas Leela encapsulates the vibrant energy of this season, aligning with the festivities of Holi, where colors and joy fill the air, celebrating love and harmony. Basanta Raas Leela was first performed in the year Shakabda 1738, on the full moon night of the Manipuri month of Sajibu (Cheitra Purnima), which fell on a Tuesday at the Langthabal Palace. This captivating performance is held annually during the full moon night of the Basanta season, specifically in the month of Sajibu, at Shri Shri Govindaji Temple. After offerings are made to the deity, Raas Leela is then performed at various local mandaps until the full moon night of the month of Kalen (May). Basanta Raas Leela draws inspiration from several texts, including the "Brahma Beibratta Puran" and "Geet Govinda" by Jayadeva Kavi, along with ideas from works such as the "Padakalapataru," "Sangeet Madhaba," and "Raas

Ullasantantra." It also enacts certain parts of the "Shri Mad Bhagavata Mahapurana," although some episodes are omitted. This performance primarily embodies the themes of Shringar Rasa (the essence of love and beauty) and Drishya Kavya (visual poetry). Two unique features of this Raas Leela are the episodes of Aber Khel and Radha Maan. Aber Khel showcases the joyous act of Lord Shri Krishna playing with colors alongside the gopis, marking it as a significant moment in the sequence of Basanta Raas. In contrast, Radha Maan depicts a poignant episode where Shrimati Radhika feels hurt upon seeing Lord Shri Krishna happily interacting with Chandrabali at Chandrabali Kunja. Sensing Shrimati Radhika's feelings, Lord Shri Krishna seeks her forgiveness. Despite his appeals, Shrimati Radhika struggles to forgive him, prompting Lord Shri Krishna to surrender his peacock-feathered crown at her feet as a gesture of repentance. Ultimately, Shrimati Radhika forgives him, allowing the Raas Leela to continue with the gopis. Additionally, Basanta Raas Leela perform two types of Bhangi: Bhangi Achouba Pareng and Khurumba Pareng, each adding to the rich texture of this traditional celebration.

Cultural Significance

Basanta Raas Leela holds immense cultural importance in Manipuri society. It serves several functions:

1. **Spiritual Devotion:** The performance is a form of worship, allowing participants to express their devotion to Lord Krishna. It creates a sacred atmosphere where the divine is celebrated through art and movement.
2. **Community Bonding:** The communal aspect of the performance fosters a sense of belonging and shared identity. It brings together people from various backgrounds, strengthening social ties and encouraging collective participation.
3. **Cultural Preservation:** Basanta Raas Leela is a vital means of preserving Manipuri culture and traditions. Through the transmission of stories and artistic practices, younger generations learn about their heritage and the values embedded within it.
4. **Artistic Expression:** The performance is a showcase of Manipuri artistry, blending dance, music, and theater. It provides a platform for artists to express their creativity while honoring traditional forms.

Contemporary Relevance

In contemporary times, Basanta Raas Leela continues to thrive, adapting to changing cultural dynamics while maintaining its core values. Modern performances may incorporate new elements, such as contemporary dance styles or innovative staging, while still honoring the traditional narrative. Festivals and cultural events often feature Basanta Raas Leela, attracting both local and international audiences. This exposure helps to promote Manipuri culture globally, fostering appreciation for its unique artistic heritage. Moreover, educational institutions in Manipur and beyond are increasingly incorporating Basanta Raas Leela into their curricula, ensuring that the younger generation remains connected to this vital aspect of their cultural identity.



Krom (sequence) of Basanta Raas Leela

Basanta Raas Leela is performed at Shri Shri Govindaji Temple and other local mandaps. The krom (sequence) of Basanta Raas in both places are mostly similar, but there is also some difference. The krom (sequence) is given below:

Sequence of the Basanta Raas Leela performed at Shri Shri Govindaji Temple

- Idols of Shri Radha Govindaji brought to the centre of the Raas Mandali and placed on the Bhadachakra.
- Nata Sankirtana
- Kunja Aarti
- Chandan Changba
- Pung Raga
- Todi Basanta Raga
- Vrindavan Barnan
- Krishna Abhisar
- Gopi Abhisar
- Makokchingbi slok
- Mandali Sajan
- Gopi Rup Barnan
- Gopi Raga
- Gopi Jagoi, Chali, Duitaal and Tanchap
- Bhangi Achouba
- Krishna Nartan
- Radha Nartan
- Falgun Khel
- Chandrabali Thiba
- Chandrabali Lengthokpa
- Chandrabali Nartan
- Radha Maan
- Sloka (Krishna Biraha)
- Yugal Rup Barnan
- Seba Changba
- Gopi Prathana
- Khurumba Bhangi
- Pushpanjali
- Kunja Aarti

In the Shri Shri Govindaji Temple performance, the Brahman takes the role of serving Lord Shri Krishna and Shrimati Radhika in the spirit of a Gopi (Gopi Bhav).

Sequence of Basanta Raas in Local Mandap

- Nata Sankirtana
- Boriba Changba
- Pung Raga (Nuwa Raga)
- Sutra will sing "Touri Basanta" Raga
- Brindaban Barnan
- Krishna Abhisar
- Murali Nath
- Radha walk along with Gopis
- Radha Abhisar
- Abhisar Thungba
- Gopi Lengthokpa
- Gopi raga

- Mapop Jagoi
- Bhangi Pareng achouba
- Krishna Nartan
- Radha Nartan
- Makokchingbi Jagoi
- Mathangchatpi Jagoi
- Abher Khel
- Sakhi Ukti (Geet)
- Chandrabali Nartan
- Radha Maan
- Khurumba Bhangi
- Prathana
- Pushpanjali
- Aarti
- Grihagaman

The performance sequences of Basanta Raas in both places are mostly similar, with only small differences. In local mandaps, young boys and girls perform the roles of Lord Krishna and Radha, while in Shri Shri Govindaji Temple, idols of Radha and Lord Krishna are placed at the center. Because of this, local performances include more movements and dances.

In local mandaps, there are extra dance sequences like Mathangchatpi Jagoi along with Makokchingbi Jagoi. Some solo dances by Braja Gopis, such as Khomdonlangbi, is also performed. The ending part of the performance is also different. At Shri Shri Govindaji Temple, Basanta Raas ends with Pushpanjali and Aarti. In local mandaps, there is an additional final sequence called Grihagaman, which shows Lord Krishna and the Gopis returning to their homes.

Seating Hierarchy in the Raas Mandali

The seating arrangement within the Raas Mandali is meticulously organized, reflecting the spiritual and cultural essence of Raas Leela. Each participant's position is determined by their role in the performance:

1. Mandop Mapu (Chief Organizer): Positioned in the southwestern corner, facing north, the Mandop Mapu oversees the entire performance, ensuring it adheres to tradition.
2. Rasdhari (Pung Player): Seated in the northwestern corner facing east, Rasdhari leads the musical aspect, symbolically aligning with the auspicious direction for spreading the divine Naam. Their assistants sit to the right, ensuring a harmonious flow of music.
3. Sutradhari (Vocalist): Facing south, Sutradhari narrates the story, weaving together the various elements of Raas Leela. Their assistants sit to the left, supporting the narrative with additional voices.
4. Ishraj Khongba (String Instrument Player): Located next to the Sutradhari on the left, facing south, the Ishraj player enhances the emotional backdrop of the performance.



5. Bangshi Khongba (Flutist): Positioned to the left of Ishraj Khongba, the flutist plays a crucial role, symbolizing Krishna's divine call.
6. Moibung Khongba (Conch Player): Seated to the right of the Rasdhari, facing east, the conch player signifies the divine presence with their instrument.
7. Jagoi Ngakpa (Guardian of the Performance): Located near the eastern gate, facing west, the Jagoi Ngakpa ensures the sanctity and correctness of the rituals.
8. Arangpham (Arranger): Situated at the northwestern side behind the Raas Mandali, the Arangpham assists with logistical arrangements, ensuring all participants are correctly positioned. The Raas Mandali is a sacred space, embodying the spiritual significance of the performance. Each seating arrangement is imbued with meaning, reflecting the connection between the performers and the divine events they portray. This careful design transforms the Raas Mandali into the heart of the Raas Leela, celebrating the eternal love between Shrimati Radhika and Krishna through the lens of devotion (Bhakti).

Costume of Basanta Raas Leela

Manipuri dance costumes have evolved significantly over the centuries, influenced by cultural changes, technological advancements, and shifting aesthetic preferences. This evolution is closely tied to the region's history, particularly during the reigns of its kings. The tradition of elaborate costumes for Raas Leela began under Maharaj Bhagyachandra. Costumes for Shri Shri Govindaji and the Gopis were crafted using locally sourced materials like copper and mirrors, reflecting indigenous designs inspired by local deities. The focus was on creating visually stunning costumes that embodied the spiritual essence of Manipuri Bhakti traditions. The introduction of Nitya Raas led to further refinements in costume design. New materials, such as satin, became popular, and designs grew more elaborate. The traditional Koktumbi headgear was replaced with the ornate Jhapa-Kurak Paibi, a butterfly-shaped ornament, marking a shift toward more visually striking styles. After the 1970s, significant changes in costume materials and construction occurred. Traditional elements were replaced by lighter, synthetic materials, which altered their appearance. This shift introduced a degree of commercialization, distancing modern costumes from their handcrafted origins. Nonetheless, the essence of the costumes still conveys the divine narratives central to Manipuri dance.

Male Costumes

Dhoti: Male dancers wear brightly colored dhotis, known as dhoras, draped uniquely for flexibility in intricate footwork. The front is often pleated in the form of an elephant trunk (Samu Manaton).

Headgear: Dancers portraying Lord Krishna wear headgear decorated with peacock feathers, symbolizing Krishna's divine nature.

Female Costumes

Potloi and Kumin Potloi Costumes: Introduced by Maharaj Bhagyachandra for the Gopis, these costumes resemble traditional Manipuri bridal attire.

Kumin: The Potloi features a barrel-shaped, heavily embellished skirt called the Kumin, embroidered with gold and silver threads and adorned with mirror pieces and floral motifs. Its translucent top border enhances the dancer's movements.

Choli and Veil: The upper body is covered with a velvet choli, complemented by a translucent veil, adding to the dancer's ethereal appearance.

Alankaara Jewelry: Both male and female dancers wear various jewelry pieces, including necklaces, bangles, and garlands of flowers that enhance their attire and the performance's spiritual ambiance.

Ghunghroos: Unlike other Indian classical dance forms, Manipuri dance does not use ghunghroos, emphasizing fluidity and harmony over rhythmic sounds. The evolution of Manipuri dance costumes reflects a delicate balance between tradition and modernity, ensuring that this art form continues to captivate audiences while honoring its rich cultural heritage.

CONCLUSION

Basanta Raas Leela stands as a vibrant testament to the rich cultural and spiritual heritage of Manipur. Through its intricate choreography, lyrical storytelling, and communal participation, this performance not only encapsulates the divine love between Lord Shri Krishna and Shrimati Radhika but also fosters a profound sense of identity and belonging among the Manipuri people. Its historical roots in the Bhakti movement and its evolution under royal patronage have shaped a unique artistic expression that remains deeply relevant today. The performance transcends mere entertainment, serving as a powerful medium for spiritual devotion and community bonding. It reflects the perennial themes of love, forgiveness, and renewal, mirroring the cyclical nature of life itself. As Basanta Raas Leela continues to adapt to contemporary contexts, incorporating modern elements while honoring traditional narratives, it plays a crucial role in cultural preservation and the transmission of values to future generations. In essence, Basanta Raas Leela is not just a dance; it is a living tradition that embodies the spirit of Manipuri culture, reinforcing the importance of ritual, art, and community in fostering spiritual enrichment and harmony. Through its enchanting performances, it invites audiences to partake in a shared journey of devotion, joy, and celebration, ensuring the continuity of this cherished cultural legacy for years to come.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Devi, D. L. (2010), *Sashtriya Nrityagi Mityengda Jagoi Raas*, Imphal: Wahengbam Shakhi Devi, Ashangba Communication.
2. Devi, S.K. (2006), *Raas Makhal Amasung Nunggi Masak*, Imphal: Shrimati Kshetrimayum Ongbi Thouranisabi Devi.



3. Devi, Y. G., Singh, M. C., & Singh, R. S. (2015), *Manipuri Raslila-A Perspective, a book Spectrum of Manipuri Culture*, Delhi: Akansha Publishing House.
4. Devi, P. L., & Maisnam, P. (2022), *Performing Arts and Culture*, New Delhi: Ruby Press & Co.
5. Devi, P. T. (2023), *Sacred and Secular in Manipuri Ras Leela and Other Essays*, Ruby Press & Co, New Delhi.
6. Ibochaoba, H. (2009), *The Pre-World War-II Form of Ras Leela*, Imphal: (L) Haobam Ongbi Shantibala Devi.
7. Meitei, S. Y., Chaudhuri, S.K., & Arunkumar, M.C. (2020), *The Cultural Heritage of Manipur*, New Delhi: Manohar Publication & Distributors.
8. Singh, P. I. (2005), *Manipuri Raas Amasung Atei Krishna Leelasing*, Imphal: Phanjoubam Iboton Singh.
9. Singh, P. D. (2019), *Manipuri Raas gi Lengdraba Itihas*, Imphal: Lamyamba Ayekpam Nandini Devi.
10. Sharma, S. K., & Singh, P. I. (2023), *Shri Shri Govindajida Katliba Raas Makhal Ahumgi Eesheising*, Imphal: Ashangbam Communication.