

Manipuri *Sankirtana*

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Sankirtana Tradition in Manipur

It is on record that *Kirtana* singing, possibly from Bengal, entered this land as early as the fifteenth century, during the reign of King Kiyamba of Manipur (1467-1508). Perhaps it entered much earlier. The tradition took roots in this artistic soil and flowered in distinctive rhythms and movements in course of time. This fifteenth century *Kirtana* was offered before Lord Vishnu, who was housed in a small temple which still exists in a village called Vishnupur. Very little is known about this type of *Kirtana* singing. But during the reign of a great Manipur king, Garibniwas (1709-1748), who adopted the Ramanandi cult, an old school of *Kirtana* singing, in the style of *Bangdesh* or *Ariba Pala*, became popular and is still preserved and practised at the royal palace and some other centres of Manipur. Rajarshi Bhagyachandra introduced a new style of *Kirtana* singing known as *Nata Sankirtana* which found its supreme expression during the reign of King Chandrakirti of Manipur (1850-1886), when the 64 *rasa*-s were presented for the first time in 64 sessions spreading over 32 days. The Manipuri musician, who sings *Kir-*

Guru Rajnidhi (centre) in Ariba Pala

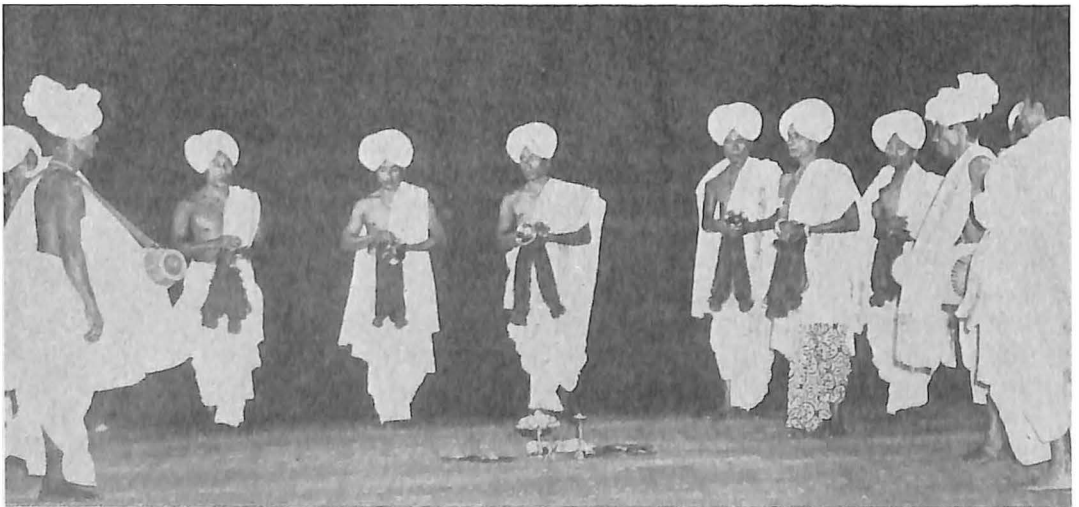


tana, is called *Nata*. It is a classical term in Sanskrit, signifying a person who knows the four *abhinaya*-s and different types of *Natya*, who is able to merge in the *raga* which he is trying to portray and who appears physically on the stage: a dancer with songs on the lips. As a matter of fact, Manipuri *Nata Sankirtana* represents an extension of *Leela Kirtana* of Thakur Narottamadas of Bengal (sixteenth century), with the application of pure types of *alapa*, *raga*, *tala* etc. and with *Goura-Chandrika*, singing the glories of Sri Krishna Chaitanya to serve almost as a prologue to each *Sankirtana* performance, a tradition which is still continued in the Manipuri *Nata Sankirtana*. The *Nata Kirtana* still ends with *Nityai-Pada*, a few lines in praise of *Nityai*, after traversing a long way for about five hours of *raga* singing mixed with *samchara*-s punctuated by *tala*-s: *Tintala*, *Duital*, *Rajmel* and *Ektal* (*Tanchup* and *Monkup*) in a series, giving also sufficient scope for executing the various movements and *gati*-s called *Cholom* (*Chalan*) which is also a highly stylised movement. The *pada*-*vali*-s of the various Vaishnava poets in old Bengali, Maithili and Brajabuli, including even the compositions of the great Manipuri vocalists, provide the musical text. The appreciative audiences weep and lie prostrate before the musicians as a sign of devotion. There are other waves of Bengali *Kirtana* singing like *Manoharsai*, *Dhop*, with even the classical style of *Dhrupad* entering this area during various epochs of history and still retaining more or less their authenticity. The Bengali *Kirtana* was reborn, so to say, on the 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 texture and complexion in the presentation of the *rasa*-s.

Devotional Sentiments (Rasa-Shastra)

The inspiration and teaching of the six scholarly Gosvamins of Vrindavana finally determined the doctrinal trend of Bengal Vaishnavism. They made modern Vrindavana the chief intellectual and religious centre of the sect, where its philosophy, its theology, its ritualism and its *Rasa-Shastra* were created.

Manipuri Nata Sankirtana: invocation



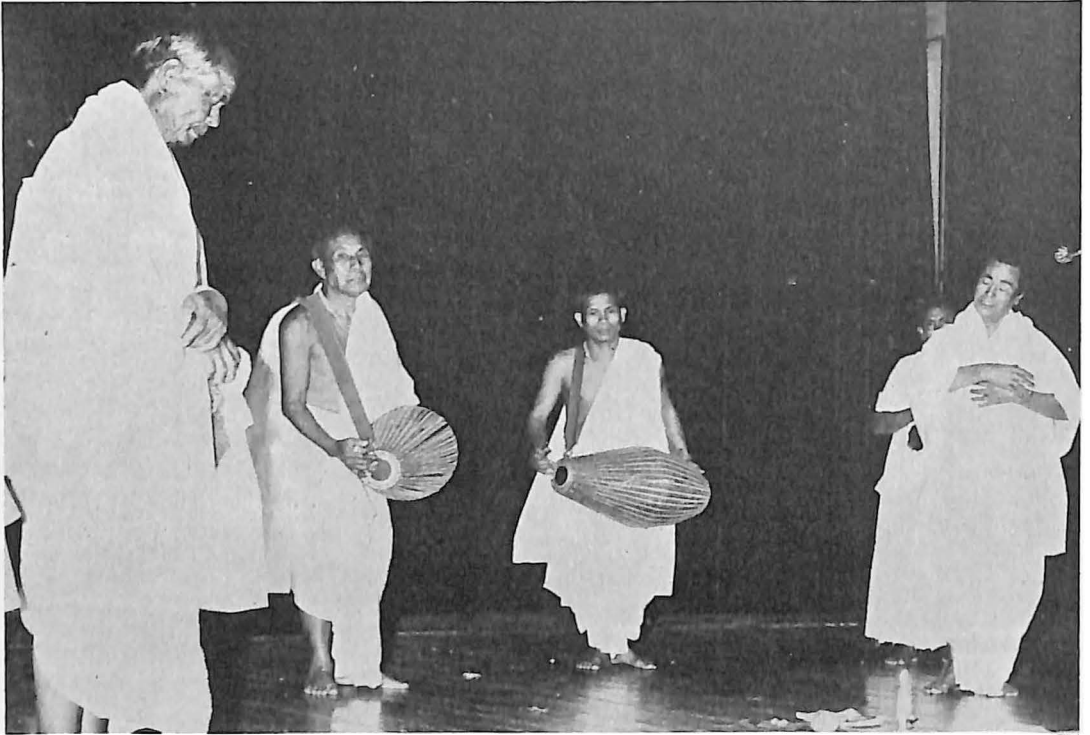


Ariba Pala: *Preparing for Rajmel*

Among these six immediate followers of Sri Krishna Chaitanya, the credit for first systematising its supreme religious emotion, that of Bhakti, belongs to Rupa Gosvamin. His two Sanskrit works (on the Vaishnava *Rasa-Shastra*) namely *Bhakti-Rasamrita-Sindhu* and its supplement, *Ujjala Nilamani* gave a new turn to the old *Rasa* theory of conventional poetics. These two works constitute the Bhakti *Rasa-Shastra* of the Vaishnava faith: a kind of Rhetoric of Bhakti with all its psychology, conceit and imagery. The love of Krishna is conceived as an aspect of psychology; thus a rhetoric of erotic sentiment evolved. The literary *Sahridaya* is replaced by the religious Bhakti. The love of Krishna (*Krishna-rati*) is installed as the dominant feeling (*Sthayi-bhava*) which, through its appropriate Excitants (*Vibhava-s*) as well as Ensouants (*Anubhava-s*) and Auxiliary Feelings (*Vyabhichari-bhava-s*) is raised to a supreme condition in the susceptible mind as the Bhakti *rasa*.

To the orthodox rhetorician, Bhakti is only a *bhava* and not a *rasa*. The question whether Bhakti is *rasa* or *bhava* has been discussed at length by Jagannatha in his *Rasa-Gangadhara*. In the opinion of orthodox rhetoricians, it is *Devadi-Vishaya-Rati* and, therefore, a *bhava* and not a complete *rasa*. Jiva Gosvamin, however, in his *Priti-Samdarbha* remarks that the phrase, *devadi*, means "ordinary gods" and does not apply to the supreme Krishna. Madhusudana Sarasvati is also of the view that Bhakti as a *rasa* is *Svanubhava-Siddhi* and, therefore, incapable of proof.

To the Vaishnavas of the Bengal school, Bhakti is a "literary-erotic emotion transmuted into a deep and ineffable devotional sentiment, which



Manoharsai

is intensely personal and is yet impersonalised into a mental condition of disinterested joy". The attitude is a curious mixture of the literary, the erotic and the religious. There is also the living poetic experience of poets like Jayadeva (with his *Geet-Govindam*) and this also finds expression in vernacular poetry (Vidyapati and Chandidasa). The Hindu *Purana*-s (of which the *Srimadbhagavatam* constituted the fountain source of medieval Vaishnava Bhakti) provide another source of inspiration. It is natural to see spectators weeping at certain moments of a tragic play. But to watch a devotee shedding tears and lying prostrate as the lines during a *Kirtana* performance describe the exquisitely attired Radha waiting for Lord Krishna is an experience which can be shared by the devotees alone. Here the *rasa* is *Ujjvala* or *Madhura Rasa* centring round Krishna, as the ideal hero, and His *sakhi*-s.

Department of Sri Govindajee

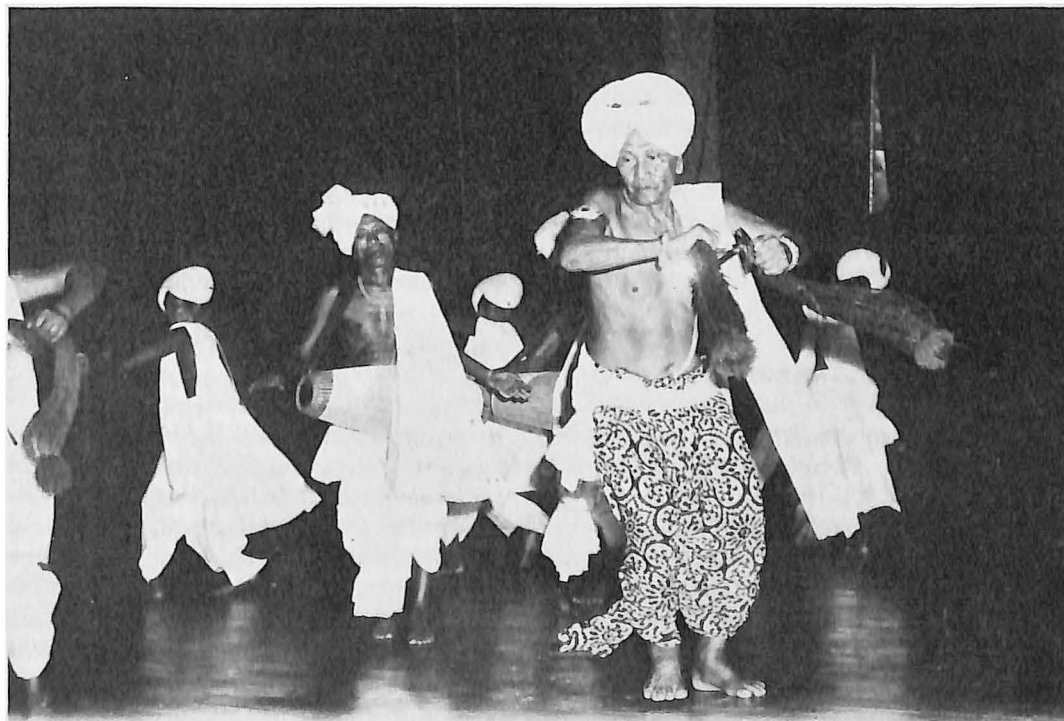
Of the various departments of the royal palace numbering about sixteen, the department of Sri Govindajee (around which the Vaishnavite prayer revolved) constitutes even now a major department. This department has again various sub-divisions for which Manipuri people from four basic functional divisions (called *Pana*-s in Manipur), based primarily on caste, have to contribute in terms of manpower and materials. The sub-divisions or *Loisang*-s are: (a) *Pujari Loisang* (cook) (b) *Duhon Loisang* (assis-

tants to cooks) (c) *Bhandari Loisang* (stores department for the temple) (d) *Kitna Loisang* (derived from *Kirtaniya*, and meant for arranging materials for the Puja) (e) *Moibung Loisang* (conch players) (f) *Garot* (guard—for security purpose during the Puja offered by the king) (g) *Jagoisabi Loisang* (dancers) (h) *Pala Loisang* (for *Kirtana* groups, old and new, divided into four major groups: Palahan, Palanaha, Loipakchaba and Sevak Pala) and (i) *Brahma Sabha* (consisting of learned brahmins regulating the rituals and scholastic principles and forming the final court of appeal in matters religious, with the king as the head). Strictly in conformity with the Vaishnavite *ashtakal* (or eight periods in which a day is divided in the life of Krishna, His friends and *gopi*-s), the various groups have to perform the necessary *arati*-s, and Puja before the three groups of images in the royal temple: Radha and Krishna, Krishna and Balaram and Jagannath, Balaram and Subhadra (after Puri Jagannath). This institution of the *Loisang*-s of Govindajee took shape in the second half of the eighteenth century during the reign of Rajarshi Bhagyachandra who introduced Ras Leela in Manipur. Luckily, it still survives.

Types of Sankirtana

As indicated earlier, Manipuri *Sankirtana* admits of various types or styles of singing which evolved into distinctive patterns in the course of about two hundred years. *Ariba Pala* or *Bangdes* is the oldest form associated earlier with the Ramanandi cult and later changed into the Vaishnavite

Guru Ibungohal Singh doing the Cholom in Nata Sankirtana



prayer of Bengal. *Loipakchaba* and *Sevak Pala*-s come under this group. Then came *Nata Sankirtana*, the highly evolved style of *Kirtana* singing carrying the flavour of this land and its people; it found supreme expression in the presentation of the 64 sessions of 64 *rasa*-s in the nineteenth century. There is also *Manoharsai*, another type of singing associated with Thakur Narottamadas of Bengal (sixteenth century A.D.), which came from Bengal but which was enriched by the various dance patterns of this land. The Bengali *Dhop* style of singing along with the *Chaitanya Sampradaya* found its great exponents in the nineteenth century and this is still continued among the *Kirtana* musicians. The Ras Leela-s, that is Kunja Ras (held on Ashwin Purnima), Maharas (on Kartik Purnima), Vasant Ras (on Vasant Purnima) and Gostha Leela (on Gopalsthami) 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, the *Sankirtana*, remains confined to the valley of Manipur.

Ariba (Bangdesh) Pala

It is on record that *Kirtana* singing took place in Manipur in the fifteenth century during the reign of King Kiyamba of Manipur. But we have so far found no evidence of the distinctive type of this *Kirtana* singing. It might possibly be an earlier form of *Ariba Pala* (called *Bangdesh Pala*) which adorned the royal palace during the reign of King Garibniwas of Manipur (1709-1748). The *Bangdesh* style is supposed to have been introduced by a Bengali *Kirtana* singer who possibly came 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 the Ramanandi cult (with phrases like *Ramo Ramo Govindo*), even though it becomes a prayer of the Manipur Vaishnavas in the eighteenth century and a forerunner of *Nata Kirtana* singing. It is based on the old Indian *raga*-s and *ragini*-s and the *tala*-s 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.

Manoharsai Style of Kirtana

Manoharsai, a classical form of *Padavali-Kirtana*, is clearly a gift from Bengal. Thakur Narottamadas, the great Vaishnava savant of the sixteenth century, introduced it on the basis of the *Dhruva-prabandha-gana* which he had mastered at Vrindavan. His style of *Kirtana* was, of course, *garanhati* and it was recognised as *Leela* or *Rasa Kirtana*. After him, three other types of *Kirtana*, *Manoharsai*, *Reneti* and *Mandarini* evolved. When this style of *Kirtana* entered Manipur in the nineteenth century, it was popularly known as *Manoharsai*, adopting almost the entire sequence of *Nata Kirtana* singing. A few great names from Bengal are still remembered and some Manipuri gurus also learnt at their feet and even at the feet of the great



Guru Ibungohal Singh in one of the Cholom poses

masters of Bengal. It is purely the *Mahayajna-Padavali Kirtana* which has almost assumed an integrated texture from the four schools of *Padavali-Kirtana* singing in the form of Manipuri *Manoharsai*. It is still a living tradition, with a few old exponents giving their best possible performance. The forerunner of this type of *Padavali-Kirtana* is *Krishna Kirtana* of Vadu Chandidas (West Bengal) and Kavi Vidyapati (Mithila) which paved the way for the *Nama Kirtana* of Shri Chaitanya (fifteenth century). Attempts are being made to present the themes in Manipuri.

Dhop type of Kirtana or the Chaitanya Sampradaya

In the opinion of Swami Prajnanananda, 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 the nineteenth century, soon after its introduction into Bengal. The theme of the *Dhop Kirtana* of Bengal was composed mainly of the sportive play of Sri Krishna. It was a comparatively light piece. But when this style came into contact with the genius of the Manipuri musicians it was transformed into a serious type of *Kirtana*, which embodied all the major themes from the life of Sri Chaitanya as recorded in *Chaitanya-Charitamrita* of Krishnadas Kaviraj such as *Sanaton Sanga*, *Ramananda Sanga*, *Haridas Nirjan* etc. It then became known as the popular type of *Kirtana* termed *Chaitanya Sampradaya* or the school of Chaitanya. It is believed that when the *Dhop Kirtana* musicians rise to dance, they become part of the *Chaitanya Sampradaya*. This is still a living tradition, even though its popularity has been considerably eclipsed by the *Nata Kirtana* style of singing.

Nata Kirtana Style

Pride of place however, must go to the *Nata Kirtana* style of singing which was introduced during the reign of Rajarshi Bhagyachandra (1763-1798). The great masters and scholars of that period composed and sang the *padavali* strictly after the Bhagavata tradition and other major Vaishnavite texts and also based the composition on the traditional *raga-s* and *ragini-s* of the classical tradition. Modern research has discovered several regional overtones in the structure of particular *raga-s* and *ragini-s*. The Manipuris consider the *Nata Kirtana* singing style their own and it is clearly a form of collective prayer, a *mahayajna*, lasting for about five hours at a stretch with a great deal of ritual, movement 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 the *Nata Sankirtana* at the various temples will make the point clear. There are usually sixteen artistes forming a circle in the *mandop*: the *Abhineta* (called *Isheihanba* in Manipuri), three of his assistants, an associate of the *Abhineta* (called *Dahar*), his nine assistants, and two players on the Manipuri *Mridanga* (which is called the *Pung*). The entire group is called the *pala*. The *mandop* has for its centre a plantain leaf with a piece of cloth as the seat (*Asana*) on it and other puja offerings like a lamp, paan and fruit. This is called *mandali puja* since five of the Vaishnava saints (Sri Krishna Chaitanya, Nityainanda, Advaita, Gadadhar and Srivasa) are supposed to be seated there and worshipped by the devotees.

According to the Vaishnavite text, the *Bhakti Ratnakara*, the *Khola* (*Mridanga*) and *Kartala* constitute the wealth of Sri Chaitanya and both are to be worshipped. Following this tradition, the sixteen sets of *Kartala-s* (*Ghana Vadya-s*) and the two *Khola-s* are worshipped with lamp, tilak and incense by all the artistes, who almost play the role of the priests of a *yajna*. Clothes are distributed to the artistes by the performers of the *yajna*. This is the *adhivasa* stage of the *Sankirtana Yajna*. The president of the assembly (called *Mandop mapu* in Manipuri) then makes the announcement, *Valaha Premse Kaho Shri Radhakrishna Bhakta Prabhu Nityai Chaitanya Advaita Kahata Santa Sadho Madhuras Vani Hare Hare*. When this recitation reaches the stage *Chaitanya*, the *Mridanga* players strike the *bol*, *Ten Ten Tat Ta Tang*, which is known as the beginning of the major *raga* of the *Mridanga*. The *Mridanga raga* is followed by the *raga* of the particular song which starts with *Ta-ri ta na na*. This is the *alapa* portion of the introductory *raga* chosen by the *Isheihanba*. Before this *alapa* stage, the *Mridanga raga* will continue with a recitation from the *Isheihanba*: *Krishna Priti Ananda Hari Bole* to which all the remaining *nartaka-s* respond with *Hare Hare*. This is followed by a series of *Mridanga bol-s* along with the striking sound of the *Kartala-s* known as the *samchara* of the *Mridanga*. Out of various *samchara-s* (numbering more than thirty) usually it is the *Kartik samchara* which is chosen at this stage. When this finishes, the *Isheihanba* starts the *Sabha Vandana* (salutation to the audience), then the *Guru Vandana* and returns

to his original *raga* which should deal with a Chaitanya theme known as *Gourachandra*. This is just the introductory portion of a full-length *Nata Sankirtana* to which the *rasika-s* respond with tears. They lie prostrate before the artistes with cries of *bhalo* as a mark of deep appreciation.

After the exciting climax of *Rajmala*, there is scope for the *Dahara* and the other artistes to execute a few exquisite movements known as *Cholom* (derived from Sanskrit *Chalanam*). These are highly complicated, graceful and vigorous. They constitute the *Tandava* portion of classical Manipuri dance and various *gati-s* (gaits) of the movements of birds, snakes, and animals are performed with considerable artistry. The players on the *Mridanga* also reveal a little of their mastery over *tala-s* and rhythmic patterns all of which simply overwhelms the audience. From among the hundred *tala-s* mentioned in the texts and even used by the old masters, about forty are still used by the gurus. Every great *Mridanga* guru makes it a point to compose a few *tala-s*, called *tala prabhandha-s*, set to the accompaniment of a particular *padavali* text. For example, the Brahma *tala* admits of a few set compositions and the particular *tala* is afterwards known by the first lines of the *pada*: for instance *Nritanti Bipine* or *Dokha Goura*. As a matter of fact, all these set *tala-s* are presented occasionally when the *Tala Phangnaba* (Festival of *Tala-s*) is arranged at the various temples. Quite unlike some of the other traditions, the Manipuri *tala* has introductory *raga-s* and *samchara-s* (corresponding to *samchara bhava-s*) which are fixed compositions by great masters.

Dhrumel Kirtana

This is a unique type of *Nata Sankirtana*. It has fourteen *Mridanga* players and the entire sequence of *Nata Kirtana* is followed. The accent here is on the complicated *tala-s* known as *samchara-s* which number fourteen and are dedicated to the fourteen groups of Bengal Vaishnavism. The first (*Chaitanya Samchara*) is followed by the thirteen remaining *samchara-s* (performed by the other thirteen drummers) and dedicated respectively to Nityainanda, Advaita, Gadadhar, Srivasa, Dwadas Gopal (twelve *gopal-s*), *Ashta Mahanta* (eight sadhus), six *goswamin-s* (of Vrindavan), sixty-four *mahanta-s*, *Goura Bhakta Vrinda*, *Sat Sampradaya* (seven schools), fourteen *Mridanga-s*, all the *bhakta-s* and lastly *Srimad Radha Govinda*. Thus the *Dhrumel* (possibly derived from the Sanskrit term, *Dhruva molaka*) is a highly stylised, ritualised pattern of *yajna* which involves rigorous training, expertise and patience. It admits of four types: *Maha Dhrumel*, *Goura Dhrumel* (composed during the reign of King Bhagyachandra and Nara Singh respectively), *Nityai Dhrumel* and *Lairema Dhrumel* (composed during the reign of King Chandrakirti).

Future of Nata Sankirtana

It will now be seen that the *Nata Sankirtana* of Manipuri was born out of the great piety, scholarship and artistic genius of the Manipuri Vaishnavas. It flourished under the patronage of the royal courts and was developed by the great gurus and scholars who dedicated their lives to the enrichment of this tradition. The great masters are now dead and gone. It will not be pos-

sible to revive this tradition in all its glory. There are signs that this tradition now runs the risk of being cheapened, commercialised and vulgarised. The most that can be done today is to preserve its flavour with archival documentation (through slides, film, tape, photography and notation) so that the future generations can discover with admiration and pride what their forefathers achieved and derive inspiration from their creations. Under the circumstances even this would be no small consolation.

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