



NATASANKIRTANA AS A MAHAYAJNA

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Introduction

NataSankirtana of Manipur is considered as *Mahayajna* (complete sacrifice) in Vaishnavism of Manipur. Its origin is traced to the aesthetics and philosophy of *ShrimadBhagavat*. In *ShrimadBhagabhat*, the only merit in Kali yuga is HariSankirtana a person can reach his end and attain *Moksha*. From time immemorial, human has believed in the existence of the God, so we have been worshipping him in one form or the other. We worship him with the help of drum, by singing song and dance and it is known as *Ghandharbam*. The different religions of Prachin Bharat like Sheiba, Sakta, Boudha, Jainnismetc, have devised ways to worship the Istadevata starting with Sankirtana. The religious sect of Sanatan searches different means to get the almighty. In the century of Satya, Dhyan was the only means to get God, Yajna for Treta and Puja for Dwapur, and *HariSankirtana* for Kali. It is also believed that the end of Dhyan, Yajna, and Puja is equal to the observance of Hari Nam Sankirtana. It is said that those who were born in Satya, Treta, Dwapur are jealous of those who will be born in Kali Yug. Even the creator Brahma wishes to take birth as human being in Kali. In the Yug of Kali, Nam Sankirtana is the only means like Dhyan, Yajna and Puja of Satya, Treta and Dwapur respectively had been to get God. Thus, chanting of the name of Shree Krishna is the only means in Kali Yuga. This chanting of the Mahamantra will enable the soul to cross the sansarmaya to Godhead. Here, we may remember the sloka-

Hare Nam Hare Nam Hare NameibaKebalang|

KalouNasteboNasteboNasteboGatireinatha.

The above quotation means that harinam is the only way of salvation in kali Yuga. From the above, we know that the value of NataSankirtana is so high that one can go to heaven with the help of NataSankirtana. All the Manipuri VaishnavaSampradaya believe and follow the advice of Shree ChaitanyaPrabhu. So, NataSankirtana becomes a very important part and parcel of birth, death and other occasions. It had been developed as a great Yajna in our society. In fact, Yajna means to worship Vishnu.

On performing *Yajna* one should be very neat and clean, initiated, must use religious necklace urik carved from the stem of the sacred Indian basil, to put sect marks (chandan), and not to be tainted with any occasion of birth or death in the recent past. As NataSankirtana is also a Mahayajna one should follow the above principles. Those who will participate in *NataSankirtana* will use *Astabesh* (eight ornaments). By *Astabesh* we mean *Dwadashatilak*, turban, religious made from Tulsiplant (urik), sacred thread (lukun), cloth hung on the shoulder, dhoti, waist band and inner pant etc. Without these, it is not fit for Sankirtana.

In fact, the NataSankirtana is the religious *sadhana* that may be used by everybody without difficulty. Vishnupuran firmly declares that ten years of Yajna of *Satya* is equaled with one year in *Treta*, one year of *Treta* with one month of *Dwapur*, one month of *Dwapur* with one day of *Kali* in this respect. So, HariSankirtana is the only way to be followed by everybody in the epoch of *Kali*. It is said on the 12 Skandha, 5 Adhayaya 55 sloka of ShrimadBhagavata that-

*KalingSabhajayantyarjaGunanja: Sarbhagina/
YatraSankirtaneneibaSarbaSwarthohpilabhyate//*

It means that in the era of Kali, Dharma, Artha, Kam, Moksa or Mukti etc, should only be achieved by HarinamSankirtana. The Wiseman like mahapurush of the kali epoch takes HarinamSankirtana most importantly for his life. Now, we have to discuss what *Yajna* is, before discussing Sankirtana as *MahaYajna*. There are different types of Yajna. The Veda, Grihasutra, and Dharmasutra clearly defined that we should follow different Yajnas to purify the accumulated in different generations.

NataSankirtana as a MahaYajna

In the Sanskrit to English dictionary of Sir MoneirMoneir Williams, Yajna means – ‘worship’ or ‘devotion’.someAbhidhans say *TyagPurbakPujarthangAradhanathangYajnanag,* which means ‘Yajneswor’ It is an act of sacrifice for the sake of Shree Hari and to satisfy Shree Hari. Thus, the Puja and Aradhana of Shree Haris known as Yajna. According to Amarkos, there are seven Yajnas - Yajna, Yag, Adhabar, Makh, Saba, Krutu and SaptaTantu. It is from time immemorable that some Yajnas had been performed under different names like BiswajitYajna as Adhabar, PitriYajna as Saba, RajsuyaYajna as Krutu.

In the book *NataSankirtana* written by SanakhyaEbotombiHaorokcham- he says

*Yajna meansall the acts performed for the satisfaction of paramatama, pritolok, devalok and for those who have sangskar (Purification), for the beings, and for keeping the cycle of nature, for the goodness of all. Not only these, but it also denotes mantra performed by the believers of SanatanDhrama, drabya and sradha different sat karmas.*According to eminent scholarNingthoujamkholo Singh says-

Yajna is the presentation of something to the Devatas that had already, kept been prescribed for presentation from the past.

From the above it may be seen that Yajna is the nature of bowing down to the Istadevatas along with respective mantras and items according to the Devatas. There are different types of Yajnas.

They are Yajna for fire, Yajna for water, Yajna for Deva and Devi with Ghot, Yajna done at the top of hills by offering a victim to the God of winds, and Yajna for Nad Brahma etc. On the other hand, Yajna is the first foundation of religion. And the whole being of the universe is the outcome of the Yajna of Devalok. It is found on the 9th sukta of Rig Veda in these words-

BasantoAshyasidajyangGrishamah: Edham: SharadaHabi:

SaptasyasanaParidhyantri: Saptasamidha: Krita: //

Deva YadaYajnamTanbanaAbadhannaPurushampasum /

YajnenaYajnamayajantaDebastaniDharmaniPrathamanyasan//

Human beings can become paramatama as a result of the Yajnas performed by the gods with the occurrence of Spring (fat), Summer (fire), Winter (offering) seasons. Above this, the seven days of a week become Meichak or fire wood, SingkhalTaret and MeikhangAhum (morning, daytime and night time). Thus, these yajnas done by the Devatas become the first religious rituals which is ever going on. We should perform different kinds of yajnas to satisfy by the Dwija, Devaloks and Pritilokas so as to be able to follow the Devatas who are performing mahayajnas in every era for the welfare of human beings. One of the highest religion (Dharma) is to perform various Yajnas to sanctify Jivatama. And it is the only means to get Godhead is the main opinion of Sruti and Smriti. From the very beginning of Kali Yug the followers of Sanatan Dharma had been performing SankirtanaMahayajana by worshipping Shree Hari. And it is mentioned in the 11skandha, 5Adhyaya 32sloka of BhagavanVyas Deva's ShrimadBhagavatMahapurana as –

*KrishnabarnangTwisaakrishnangSangopangastraParshadang/
Yajnyagei:SankirtanaPrayairayajyastih Sumedhasa://*

The wise men worship Him who has dark colour and accompanied with instrument and various dresses, with SankirtanaMahayajna.

The features of NataSankirtana and its natures and rules are vividly discussed in the Puja Adhyaya, AdivasaAdhyaya, ParvarangaAdhyaya, NrityaAdhyaya, TaalaAdhyaya and DhruvaAdhyaya of Bharat NataShastra as –

*BrahmotangsaptarupanghiSamvetadBinishritam
DebataradhanangPunyamanantangGitabaditam.*

By keeping the seven forms given by Brahma, the worshipping ceremony is celebrated for the holy Devatas along with drum and music. The seven forms made by different taalas are celebrated in order to worship the Istadevatas. And it then comes to the seven parts of SankirtanaMahayajna. Thus, there seven roopas of NataSankirtana are - Raga houba, Raga taba, Rajmel, Tanchap, Menkup, Swadhin and Bijoy. A SankirtanaMahaYajna is celebrated following this order. The seven roopas of SankirtanaMahayajna according to Bharat's NatyaShastra which has been purportedly given by Brahma means that all the vidhividhan and vyavastha are developed from veda mantras.

The Nata-SankirtanaMahayajna was for the first time presented by DevarishiNarda with the help of instruments like drum, music and dance on the assembly of Deva, Danav etc. and it can be found on the 31 sloka of 5 Adhayaya of Bharat's NatyaShastra as -

ChitradakshinaBritoutuSaptaroopePrabartite/

SopohaneSanirgiteDebastatyavinandite//

NaradadeiyashchaGandharvei: SavayangDevadanaba:/

NirgitangSsrabita: SamyagaLayatalSamanvitam//

The Saptaroope is developed by the chitra, vartika and dakshina on the assembly of Narda and Gandharba while, raga houba is celebrated with standing stuti. Along with this taalsAbhinandan, laya etc. are done together. Thus SankirtanaMahayajna can be celebrated in a very small form. On the otherhand, it can also be celebrated as big as one can.

In a Sankirtana, the two drummers will be the two hotris standing their facing eastward under the hall. Secondly, the group of esheihanba will stand facing northward to (upohon) worship and to start singing like abhinandan etc. Then, the *duhar* and *bayan* group will stand on the north side facing southward to repeat mean to translate those sung by the *eisheihanba*.

Thus all the palas will be ritwijars to encircle yajna bedi for the saptarupadhruva to present inserial. And it is silently observed by *Mandapmapu* (in the form of Bhahma) sitting on the southern side of the hall so as not to let happen any unwanted disturbances. Again, there is one Moibungkhongba who will be seated on the western side of the mandal. He will blow the conch at different occasions of the Sankirtana to bring prosperity. From this we know that there is no difference between the Fire yajna (AganihotriYajna) and SankirtanaMahayajna because the underlying significance is the same. For the Manipuri GouriyaVaishnavas every occasion from birth to the rites of passage is associated with *SankirtanaMahayajna*. Veda shastra says that Sankirtana is a *Mahayajna*. In order to describe the intricacies of Sankirtana as a *Mahayajna*, a detailed discussion of Sankirtana is given as follows.

A Mandap is required for such a Sankirtana. There will be a Jatra or the main post of the *Mandap*. Without a *Jatra*, there will be no Sankirtana. So, we should make the mandap on a sacred and auspicious day. We all believe that among the nine posts of a mandap eight will

be the witnessess and the ninth post in the middle represents the God Gadadhar while the post very near to the house, the right side post is LalitaSundari, BishakhaSundari, ChitraSundari, ChampakalataSundari, TungabidyaSundari, IndurekhaSundari, RangadeviSundari, SudeviSundari respectively. The worshiping place at the centre of the Mandap is for Shree Gourahari. So it generally is known that a mandap is the sthan or sanctum of Shree Krishna. Above all this, the four corners of the mandap also have their own gods. And there should be a Puja on the Chingkhei or east for Vasudeva, in the Meiram for Anirudhadevata, in MoirangLaijifor PradhermaDevata, in the Koubru for Sankersen.

It is also believed that Kuber and Laxmi are the Bhandhari have seats on the western side of the mandap. It is a place where that Shree Radhika wants to meet Shree Krishna. At that time Shree Radhika chants her mantras like- HariHariHaribol. If these are known a person is known as *mandapmashakkhangba* who knows the mandop.

So, a Sankirtana cannot be held at any place at any time. On the other hand, when a Sankirtana is to be held, Arangpham is necessary. They represent Shree BorHaridash, Shree Ramananda, Shree Rup Damudor, Shree Jagannathpandit, Shree ShivanandaSen, Kalidash, Shree RaghopPandit for service of Thaomei (light), Lei Chandon, Pana, Dhup, Babok, Khonghampham, Vandhari etc. respectively. SankirtanaMurti is from the anga of Gouranga representing Shree Nivarsh from maanesheihanba is being while Abdeita from budhi and beat drums and Govinda follows them Murali from endri become pala and form prana (mind) Mukundo become duhar. On the other hand, *Nityainanda* of chita come as *bhabhokmakok*. Therefore, a *Sankirtana* is really the form and figure of Gourchandra. The Manipuri Gouriya Vishnu Sampradhyayasuppose that it is just like to see Gourachandra while seeing Sankirtana. That is why they worship while seeing Sankirtana. Abdeita had awakened Gouchandra at the rasa of Nabadwip with hungkar. So, the first Raag of pung is Abdeita in a Sankirtana.

Another important item of a Sankirtana is the MoibungKhongba. It is for the prosperity of the Sankirtana. On the other hand, we believe that it protects the evil spirits on a Shradha (sorat) and Samvatsor (Phiroi) Yajnas. ThokchomGopal Singh's book 'SankirtanaBichar'—

That the appropriate name Moibung (Conch) is Utgrashrabaand his father name is Romharshran. As far as Sambasai,e, arranger is concerned it is also one of the most important

parts in a Sankirtana. If he is not fit for the post of Sambasa, there is apradha. There is a saying that Krishna apradha can be pardon but the apradha or ritualistic offence of vaishnava that can never be pardoned. On the book *NataSankirtanaNeinaba* by LeimapokpamLakpati Singh, it is written –

If the Sambasa does not observe his duties properly it amounts to vaishnav offence. Of all the offences vaishnav offence is the most serious one. It ratherpaves the way to hell for the household who is offering the Sankirtana. There is no expiation for vaishnava offence. Theoretically Sambasa is performed by Sudevi and Kasturi. The Nabadwipbhava is Shivananda or sometimes said to be Brahma. The Sambasa must arrange seats for princes, princesses and brahmanvaishnavas. Without a Sambasa everything will be chaotic.

From the above, we know that there should be appropriate seats for princes, princesses, the royal ladies Brahman, Vaishnava etc. and it should be the duty of Sambasa. So without him it is a little difficult to start Sankirtana. So, Sambasa is also one of the important parts in NataSankirtana. In a Sankirtana, there is one Khonghampham literally washing place. It is very important one in the Sankirtana. It is a place where every Vaishnava, Brahmin and everybody will wash their heart and soul before entering the yajnasthan or the sanctum. There is a pit in the washing place where a piece of banana plant is kept. Here, the departed soul will live for the day to attend the Sankirtana. Shree Hari's name and his lelais also very important in a kirtan. Mahadeva is the devata who is on the place of khonghamfam. There are various rules and regulations controlling the entrances to the mandap at different stages of the Sankirtana.

These rules are the traditional rules which are strictly followed even today. It is also mentioned in the book of *NataSankirtanaNeinabaAhumsubasaruk*, published by GulapiNataSankirtana Academy, as follows-

At the time of the beginning of Raag no one is allowed to seat holding a flower or even a floweret in their hands. And none is allowed to enter or exit out of the singing circle. If it is not the appropriate time nothing can be done till the end of the Raag.

Once more another important part of the Sankirtana is the Mandapmapu. Here also, Guru Gulapi's NataSankirtana Academy's *NataSankirtanaNeinabaAhumsubaSaruk* describes the need of Mandapmanpu as –

He will be followed by the yumbu or host who will also bow to the palas in the order of the drummers Isheishakpa, Duhar, Khonpangba and palas. After that others may enter.

From the above we know that there are different stages during which one allowed to enter and not to enter inside the singers circle from the beginning of Raag and the end of Raag. There rules have to be observed by the bhaktavaishnavas.

While performing NataSankirtana singer and drummer should compulsory done himself with Uriklukun. It is also mentioned in the "Meitei NataSankirtanaNeinabaAhumsubaSaruk" that -

A person who has not been initiated into the lukun wearing ritual is circumscribed from performing the Rajmelabhinaya. By that very token we may ask the propriety of a female singer, who is not generally initiated into this ritual, performing the Rajmelabhinaya.

From this we know that all the singer and drummer must use lukun while participating a Sankirtana. And on the other hand it denotes that woman without lukun should not represent as singer in a NataSankirtana but in the kirtan they may. In fact, NataSankirtana is meant for women also but there is Nupi Pala in the form of worship. Raseshori Pala which is introduced by BhagyachandraMaharaj for his daughter Bimbabati is in the form of kirtan.

According to ShrimadBhagavatPuran, there are nine Bhakties. They are Shriban, Kirtan, Smaran, PadaSebanam, Archan, Bandana, Dasya, Sakhyam and Atmanibedan. All the above Bhakties is in a Sankirtana. That is why a NataSankirtana is a Yajna.

We may conclude by saying that the features of Yajna included in NataSankirtana are the internal parts of Sankritana. For example Raagahouba, Raagataba, Raagamel, Raagatanchap, Raagasswadhin and RaagaBijoy is compulsorily to be performed in the Maha Yajna. To perform NataSankirtana a Mandap is also essential.

Adhivash which is performed one day before Sankirtana is such a form of Yajna of inviting Deva and Devis (gods and goddesses) and offering them their proper places in the 'YajnaMandap'. This Yajna is closely related to NataSankirtana.

Indian sages (Muni) compared Adhivash with Yajna and expressed that it is similar to the actual performance of the Yajna. To perform puja prior to Sankirtana is much similar to perform Yajna itself.

Therefore, before doing 'Ranga Puja' of Mandap (i.e. to perform puja at the centre of the Mandap) Pung, Eshei and Yajna is not performed. Ranga puja is essential for Maha Yajna. To perform Sankirtana for Shradha Karma, *Khonghampham* is essential. All the Muni-Rishi and Brahman-Vaishnavas who come to attend the Yajna should be served at the *Khonghampham* by cleaning their feet. It is believed that by doing so one could attain blessing from them. This part cannot be skipped, it is regarded as a very essential part. This is mentioned in 12 Skandha, 8 Adhyaya and 38 sloka of Shrimad Bhagavat as follows -

After offering seats to Nara Narayan their feet will be washed and offering arja, chandan, dhup, dip, flowers, puja will be offered to them.

This form is still in practice and can be seen in *Shradha karma* that *Khonghampham* is kept at the entrance but a little farther from the actual entrance of the singers' circle.

Before Sankirtana begins, a ritual practice called *Boriba* is performed. It is also an essential part of Yajna. The 72 sloka of Saptamadyaya of Manu Sanghita says about *Boriba* as-

In order to perform the task according to the way of Atharva Veda a purohit of every Clan as well as a Ristik (a male brahman) is selected by the king to perform Yajna.

Before the beginning of Sankirtana, the host who arranges the Sankirtana needs to invite an arangpham (this term refers to a male attendant who serves and arranges for the occasion).

Besides, he should also invite everyone who takes part in performing Sankirtana, for example, the *pungyeiba* (who plays the Mridang), the *esheishakpa* (who sings the song of Sankirtana), the *duhar*, the *Khonpangba*, Pala etc. Invitation is given while all the preparations are completed to begin Sankirtana and it is done by offering lei-chandan, heiruk-pana and clothes. Without this no Sankirtana can start. In fact, Sankirtana is a ritual form of offering to God. So, it is believed that service to God means service to those who perform the Sankirtana and all the attendants who might be sages and devotees. On this account, the host is supposed to offer them presents as best as he could.

This tradition is taken seriously by Manu Sanghita and expresses thus-

If the host is in a position of inability to offer proper dakshina it is better for him to indulge in other activities with total faith at heart and control of the senses, such activities which may bring punya. It is better not to perform any Yajna if the host is going to be able to offer proper dakshina.

It means when any one would be unable to offer proper presents, he/she should not think to perform *Sankirtana*. Instead, they should find other ways to attain godhead. Therefore many *Karmadata* do not fear to sacrifice anything to offer to them. All those who would take part in performing Yajna have to wear sacred clothes, *dwadarshatilak*, *uric*, *lukum*, *trikatchapheijom* and *kokyet* (turban). This form of Yajna is done in *Sankirtana*.

The part of *MoibungKhongba* is also essential as it would pave the way to have the grace of god. Importance of *Moibung* (conchshell) is clearly shown in *ShrimadBhagavat*, *Vishnu puja*, *Artharba Veda* says-

A conch shell is a blend of space, the planetary system and gold. Its sound frightens enemies, controls demons and evil spirits, chases away ignorance, laziness and disease and promotes long life.

That's why, *Moibung* occupies a significant place in performing *Sankirtana* and it is compulsory to perform it at the beginning, while playing high form of *punglon* in the midst of *Rajmel* and at the end of *Sankirtana* i.e. at the time of taking *Bijoy*. The positions of all the singers and *pung* players are arranged in a fixed pattern for Yajna, and it is followed in performing *Sankirtana*. The two *pung* players who are *Yajnahota* would sit facing towards the east direction, the *esheihanba* who is the *tantadhar* would sit facing towards the north direction and *Utgatantadhar* would sit facing towards the south, the *duhar* would also sit facing the south and in this way all the *Ritiks* sit to perform Yajna would sit in a semi-circular form in the *Sankirtana* circle. The *MandapMapu* would take responsibility of taking care of the *Sankirtana*. He takes the same responsibility as the *Brahma* does in Yajna. Because of the similarity between Yajna and *Nata-Sankirtana*, there is no doubt that *Nata-Sankirtana* is a great Yajna. Besides, the 32sloka *5adhyaya* of *Akadashaskandha* of *shrimadBhagavat* introduces *NataSankirtana* as Yajna. Undoubtedly, *Manu Sanghita* says that *Brahma Yajna* is *MahaYajna*. So there is no doubt in saying that *Sankirtana* which is taken as a form of *Brahma Yajna* is *MahaYajna*. In support of this, here is the statement given in *Shree ShreeCheitanyaCharitaMrita* which in English goes like this -

Of all the Yajnas Krishna nam Yajna is the most important hundred thousand Ashwamedha are equal to one Krishnam Yajna.

Conclusion

It means Krishna Nam Yajna is important for every Yajna and AshwamedhaKoti (crore) is equal to one Krishna Nam. Therefore, viewing from different angles, when a NataSankirtana is performed based on the particular taala with strict rules and regulations, no doubt it becomes a MahaYajna. Because of the above reason, in Manipur VaishnavaSampradhya, NataSankirtana is taken as a vital part in every occasion that takes place in human life from birth to death and it cannot be kept apart from any occasions.

Lastly, it is notable that Sankirtana which is an art form transmitted from generation to generation through traditional school of guru-sishyaparampara is now institutionalized, along with the traditional school. And it becomes the fourth Indian art form recognized by the UNESCO as an Intangible Cultural Heritage. So it is hopeful that this ritualistic art form, associated with the cultural life of the Manipuris from birth to death will thrive to live on as part of Indian cultural Heritage despite the onslaught of mass consumerist culture.

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