

**THE PRESENT SCENARIO OF MANIPURI TRADITIONAL THEATRE: WITH
SPECIAL REFERENCE TO GOURALEELA**

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Manipur is a state in which various kinds of theatre are found, from the ancient time onwards. With the passage of time, these theatres had been changing their nature and style from age to age. Broadly the theatre of Manipur can be classified into three kinds. They are

1. Pre-historic theatre: The pre-historic theatre is believed to have originated from around 400 B.C. and *Lai Haraoba* being the important one in Manipur. Theatres which existed before 15th century are regarded as pre-historical theatre because no historical materials related with these theatres were found.
2. Theatre of middle century: After the advent of Vaishnavism in Manipur various kinds of theatre were developed based on the VaishnavSampardaya such as *RasLeela* of Manipur. These theatres which developed from 15th century to 19th century are regarded as theatre of middle century.
3. Modern theatre: After the Manipur was defeated in the Anglo Manipur war of 1891, English education entered along with the British, which led to the development of new form of theatre from 19th century onwards. Proscenium theatre became a new trend in modern theatre¹.

In the middle century, many forms of theatres were developed namely Udukhol, GosthaLeela, Ram Leela, GouraLeela etc. Among these theatres GouraLeela is one of the important traditional theatre which is based on the VaishnavSampardaya. This theatre form is regarded as Traditional theatre form because it is the type of theatre which forms the bridge, so as to say, between the folk and the classical or which reveals the classical touch with regional element². Moreover, it is long established from many years back and is still exist in and as a part of a Vaishnava tradition.

GouraLeela

GouraLeela is a traditional ritual oriented theatre of Manipur which depicts the life history of ChaitanyaMahaprabhu who is believed as an incarnation of Lord Vishnu in Kali

Yuga. The story of GouraLeela is based on the life history of Lord Gouranga as depicted in Brindavandas's Chaitanya Bhagavat, Krishnadas's Chaitanya CharitaMitra, Kabibhupati's Gouranga Lilamrityasetc³. GouraLeela which is clearly towards the realistic enactment emphasizes more on songs, dance and abhinaya. The script of GouraLeela is a mixture of language like Sanskrit, Bengali and Brajabali. These days except fewepisodes greater part of the GouraLeela is in Manipuri language. GouraLeela can be played in any auspicious day.

Origin and Development of GouraLeela

GouraLeela is said to have started during Chandrakriti Maharaja who reign from 1850 to 1886.⁴ The reign of Chandrakriti Maharaja in Manipur is regarded as the golden age in Manipur as there were lots of development in the art and culture of the state. It is during his reigns that the sixty four Raas of the Manipuri NataSankitan was introduced and many other dance forms like NrityaRas, GosthaLeelaetc were started. Moreover, it is from his time that Manipur theatre came under the influence of West Bengal. In GouraLeela we can see the life style and the tradition of Bengali, which would not have been possible without the influence of West Bengal.

GouraLeela is believed to have first played in Sri SriGovindaji Temple of Manipur under the guidance of the Guru AyekpamLeibakmacha Singh. Besides him, there were many others prominent Guru who contributed in the formation of the GouraLeela. They were SanakhyaOjhaKhurailakpaKoli, NongthomnamOjhaMarei and NgangbamOjhaMala. It is during the reign of Churachand Maharaja that the GouraLeela was first played in Manipuri language in Govindaji Temple.

The initial form of GouraLeela was "NimaiSanyasi" episode. The main characters were Bharati, Madhu, Sachimata, Bishnupriya and Abhiram. Latter many episodes were added and one day performance was lengthened into three days performance. During the reign of Chandrakriti Maharaja, R.K. Koli added Madhumata. It was AyekpamOjhaChagemton who introduced AbhiramSanga, JagaiMadhai and Trithabasi episode, during the reign of Churachand Maharaja. NgangomOjhaJugindro Singh in latter period, during the reign of Maharaja Bodhachandra Singh introduced Ganga Snan, Brahma Mohon and SamudraPoton and ThounaojamOjghaKunjakishore Singh also added ParbhuJanmaLeela.⁵ Thus the GouraLeela was the collective result of the long year of development under constant effort of the Gurus. With all such addition GouraLeela was

lengthened into three days performance. The sequences of the three days performance are as follows:-

First day: GouraLeela involves a series of ritualistic preliminaries before its performance. The performance of GouraLeela is preceded by a NupamachaPala in the form of Purvaranga. The Arangfam offer *Leichandanto* the Pala dignitaries. After the *Lei chandan* the three roles i.e. Nitya, Nimai and Gadadhar, who are in the middle of the Mandapa, begin to shout “Haribol” thrice which is followed by the words “Hare Hare”. The drummer begins *Raga Achauba* along with Kartal music and the young boys perform the NataSankirtana known as Nupamacha Pala. GouraLeela episode begin with the end of the Nupamacha Pala. The sequences of the GouraLeela performance on the first day are:-

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| 1. Brahma Mohan | 4. Sukriti Brahman Udhar |
| 2. PrabhuJanma | 5. BalLeela |
| 3. Ganga Snan | 6. BolBikram. |

Second day: The following sequence of episode are played in second day:-

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| 1. NityanandaBalLeela | 4. Jagai MadhaiUdhar |
| 2. QaziUdhar | 5. Kali Daman |
| 3. DigvijayaPandit | |

Third day: The following episodes are played in third and last day of the GouraLeela performance:-

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| 1. Hi lanba | 4. Abdaita Bhojan |
| 2. Prabhusamkokpa (shaving of Prubhu head) | 5. Sarbabhouma sangga |
| 3. SachiBilap | 6. Samudra Poton. ⁶ |

Following these patterns, GouraLeela was once played for three days.

Present Scenario of GouraLeela

Nowadays GouraLeela is rarely performed and many of the episodes mentioned above are not perform. Instead of following these long sequences, GouraLeela is seen playing for few selected episodes in one day according to the choice of the person who wants to offer it. In a recently conducted Gouraleela at Shri Shri GourachandraMahaPrabhu Mani Mandir, Sangaiprou Mamang Leikai, Imphal, on 14th April 2016, the given below sequence was followed in the performance:

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| 1. BalyaLeela | 5.JagaiMadhai |
| 2. Ganga Snan | 6.Nimai Sanyasi |
| 3. Sukriti Brahmin | 7. Hi Lanba |
| 4. NityanandaBalyaLeela | 8.GourangaAarti. |

Keeping the underlying theme of the play, the performance of almost all the episodes were much shortened. There was no Nupamacha Pala in the performance instead the NataSankitana part was shortened by the singing of Sutradhari. Again in a Performance held at YaiskulJanmasthan on the occasion 23rd Foundation Day of the NataSangeet Academy and Research Center on 12th September 2016, the following sequences were played:

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| 1. Nupa Pala | 5. NimaiSanyasi |
| 2. BalyaLeela | 6. Hi Lanba |
| 3. Sukriti Brahmin | 7. GourangaAarti |
| 4. JagaiMadhai | |

Though there was NataSankirtana performance, it was not performed by NupaMacha (small boy), which was a practice from earlier time, instead it was performed by men of middle age. There were no friends of Nimai like Nityai, Abhiram, Srinibasand other except Gadadhar, and Vishnupriya. Most of the parts of the play were shorten by the Sutradhari whonarrate the story through their singing. There were lots of modifications in the performance like in the ways of presentation, make up, costume, stage decorations, lightning etc. with an aim to attract the modern audience. However, the kind of quality which was witnessed a decade ago is declining and the soul of GouraLeela is diverting from its body. The simplicity of the play, the bhakti and the devotion of the audience are almost all gone which make immense differences between in the early GouraLeela and today's performance. In earlier days GouraLeela used to attract huge crowd but today the interest of the people are almost gone except for the few dedicated devotee and the parent of the participant are seen watching the performance. In earlier time the devotee offer GouraLeela for the welfare of the people, the artist who performed them or for the peace and harmony of the society but today's it is performed merely as an outcome of the workshop production or festival, which is conducted from the grant that a institution received from the Ministry of Culture for the promotion and preservation of this traditional theatre. Some of the possible reasons why the important of GouraLeelain the society is declining day by day are:-

1. **Sanamahism Movement in Manipur:** In the wake of Sanamahism movement in Manipur, which aims to revive the traditional Meitei beliefs and religion found in Manipur, the number of followers of Vaishnavism is diminishing considerably. This is one of the important reasons why GouraLeela is not offer as often as before which eventually led the art form shrink.
2. **Prohibition of GouraLeela performance in Sri SriGovindaji Temple:** In Manipur, there are some art forms which are compulsory to perform in Sri SriGovindaji Temple every year like Maharas is played on the full moon day of Kartrika and GosthaLeela is played on the Gosthastami etc. which make this art form still alive among the devotees. But there is no such rule of performing GouraLeela every year in the Temple, which is an important cause of declining value in the society. Though GouraLeela was first performed in Sri SriGovindaji Temple, it is not allowed to play these days. As said by the Gurus it is not allow to played in the temple because of the costumes and characters which are in the play like that of QaziUdhar. But this cannot be the only reason for making of such rules. One of the probable reasons can be, GourangaMahaprabhu was against the differentiation made between the caste and creed of the devotees. All are equal in his eyes in respect of devotion. Keeping this in view, the king would have made the rules of allowing the GouraLeela to perform only in the local Mandapa so that people irrespective of caste and creed can enjoy the play if not it would have been confined only for the Hindu people. In Manipur GouraLeela are offered both by the people belonging to Schedule Caste and Schedule Tribe.
3. **Modernisation and Westernisation in Manipur:** The wave of Modernisation and Westernisation has affected the rich cultural heritage of our country and so as in Manipur. The interest of the people which they used to have towards the traditional art and culture is fading due to many reasons like problem in sparing time, loss of interest in traditional art and culture as they became westernised and began to considered the traditional art form as tedious and low standard one. Such a mind-set of people also greatly affected GouraLeela to a great extends.
4. **Monotonous nature of GouraLeela performance:** GouraLeela is a Traditional Theatre which is played from many years back based on the same story of the

GourangaMahaprabhu. Though there are some changes in the speech and presentation based on the composition and direction of different Gurus, the underlying story are same. This makes the audience tedious as they already know the story. There are immense different between the audience of earlier days and in this modern days. It is the bhakti and devotion of the people which attract the GouraLeela performance in earlier days. But in this modern world, audience are more attracted with the story that have suspense and based on the new story that they are not aware of.

5. **Lack of training programme and institution in Manipur:** If we want to promote and preserved this art form, we need an effective training programme and institution which will take the initiative to pass down this art form from one generation to another. But due to the lack of such measure, there are insufficient numbers of trained artists who can play rightfully. This art form is mostly transfer from one generation to another generation through *Guru ShikshyaParampara* and it is mostly in oral form.
6. **Social relevance of GouraLeela:** There are lack of awareness about the important and underlying theme of GouraLeela by the artist and the people at large.No doubt, the aim of doing such performance during that time was the Hindu conversion process and to popularize the Chaitanya sect of Vaishnavism through the circulation of the ChaitanyaMahaprabhu stories, but if we observed such performance in details keeping the religion aside, we can get many educative values in it, which is very helpful in the society. Gouraleela is the theatre where we can see the aesthetic beauties and love in the family and in the society at large. Some episodes of GouraLeela like JagaiMadhai, DigvijayaPandit etc. give messages for the peace and harmony of the people in the society.
7. **Lack of using performance technique:** As GouraLeela is a Traditional Theatre, less performance technique like lightening; sound etc is used as compare with the modern Proscenium Theatre, which is one important reason why they fail to attract the modern audience. With the change in time, there is a need to improve the performance technique of the play keeping the originality in its form so as to adapt the changing experience of the people.

Keeping such reason and consequences in due important some effort are made by the artist of GouraLeelato preserve this art forms at one hand and on the other hand, to make the performance suitable for the modern audience form by using modern technique, keeping the originality in its. Many Workshop, Seminar and Festival are conducting from time to time. In a workshop production conducted by Prospective Repertory Theatre, Nambol, on 21st May 2008, the long day performance of GouraLeela was shortened into three hours and the wearing of *Phanek*(traditional wrapper) and using of *Rani Fi*(traditionalshawl)instead of Sari was started. ToijamSheela, the director of this institution tried to bring the GouraLeela Theatre more close to the tradition of Manipur. In some other performance many auxiliary instrument like electronic key board is also use to provide background music which make the play more realistic and interesting. Many forms of lights are also used to give effect to the play.

Though efforts are made by the people to preserve this theatre form, day by day it's important and value in society is declining. In short we can say it is one of the dying art form of Manipur. It is the high time that measures like Workshop, Seminar, Symposium, Conference, Festivals etc on GouraLeela should be conduct to make the people aware of the rich element of GouraLeela and understand the essence and important of it. So, we should try to concentrate all possible energy and resource towards creating awareness and to promote and preserve this traditional theatre from going into the oblivion.

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