

Scripting the religious- cultural practice of “Gouri” of Manipur: An Overview

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ABSTRACT

This paper is an ardent desire to unearth a dying religious- cultural practice known as ‘Gouri’ in Manipur. Realizing this depleting religious-cultural practice, this paper is an attempt to study it as a text of ‘cultural vulnerability’ in contemporary Manipur. Cultural vulnerability occurs in many contexts and in many forms. The concept of culture- sometimes becomes a ‘segregating’ episteme as well. This religious- cultural practice of ‘Gouri’ is performed by womenfolk when they gather together in the nearby temple to sing songs and hymns to God, and this gathering happens in the evening. This paper will examine the multifaceted dimensions this gathering of women has in Manipuri society. This practice will gravitate towards the myriad local, cultural, religious, indigenous knowledge systems of Manipuri society. There will be a great differentia of worldviews evident in this practice but attempt will be made to foreground the context of cultural vulnerability, cultural memory and cultural resilience when faced with erasure. This paper will try to highlight that this form of women’s congregation for singing hymns in the locality temple is dynamic. Spirituality is a deep redefinition of one’s identity. This paper raises a concern to foster critical awareness of this practice which is depleting in Manipuri society nowadays.

Keywords: Gouri, Cultural Vulnerability, Culture, Indigenous Knowledge System, Erasure.

INTRODUCTION:

The religious-cultural practice of ‘Gouri’ can be traced back to the reign of King Kyamba. This practice offers the way to the evolution of

a participatory religious culture in the state of Manipur. This depleting religious congregation can be examined from the angle of 'cultural vulnerability' which is on the verge of 'cultural erasure'. This paper is an ardent attempt to foreground the context of cultural vulnerability, cultural memory and cultural resilience when faced with erasure. According to Wakankar (2010), this can be studied as a counter-narrative to the creation of 'religion' as a historical, nationalist, and confined product. This paper aims to discuss how the religious-cultural practice of 'Gouri' can be navigated and negotiated with the discourse of cultural heritage. This paper is an urge to protect, promote, rejuvenate and revitalize cultural practices like 'Gouri'.

THE RELIGIOUS-CULTURAL PRACTICE OF 'GOURI':

'Gouri' provides the discourse of worshipping the return journey of Radha and Lord Krishna after cow-herding in the wilds. This reverberates the whole mythic discourse taking place in the story of Radha and Lord Krishna where Yashoda, Krishna's mother welcomes back his son and Balaram by sanctifying them using *arati* (also spelled as *aarti*, referring to a ritualistic ceremony involving the waving of lit lamps or flames before a deity as a form of worship and devotion) fuelled by ghee, to wade off any evil spirits if they have encountered in the wilds while cow-herding. *Aarti* is believed to be originated from Vedic rituals involving ceremonial fire also known as *yajna*. Derived from the Sanskrit word *Aratrika*, *Aarti* refers to something that eliminates *ratri*, 'darkness'. According to Steven Rosen, *Arati* signifies 'before night' or representative to the worshipper's material journey through the night- he or she is now situated in the light of God's devotion' (Rosen 2006). In Manipur, there are different types of *arati*- *Devi arati*, *Ganesh arati*, *Mahadeva arati*, *Tulsi arati*, *Govardhan arati* and many others. But the most prominent and popular ones sung in a 'Gouri' gathering are *Jugol arati*, *arati BrajaRas* and *Ram-Krishna arati*. Every day at Shri Govindajee Temple, when the clock strikes 3 a.m., there is the auspicious ringing of the *Mangal Arati*. And at 5 o' clock, there is the *Dhup Arati*.

Shri Govindaji's *Astakaal* (evening prayer ceremony) is of ten (10) kinds in Manipur. They are *Shinghar Arati*, *Bhog Arati*, *Shayon Arati*, *Utkhand Arati* which is also known as *Ghusta Arati*, *Gwal Arati*, *Bhog Arati*, *Sandhya Arati*,

Shayan Arati, *Mangal Arati* and *Dhup Arati*. Among all these ten types of *Arati*, we have four (4) *Arati* where Sankirtana is incorporated. These are *Nishant* (early morning) *Mangal Arati*, *Purvahugi Shingar Arati*, *Uprahugi Bhog Arati* and *Sayanha Sandhya Arati*. We know that the seed of Sankirtana was sown at the time of King Kyamba (1467-1508). The offering of Sankirtana at deity pujas (ceremonial worship) was initiated during the reign of King Khagemba (1597-1652). Henceforth, Sankirtana began to be widely incorporated in religious ceremonies and ritual practices of the then Hinduised Manipur. From there, it began to expand, amplify and spread its branches. During the reign of King Garibniwaj (1707-1748), the performance of Sankirtana on all the occasions of death-related ceremonies, had begun. With subsequent permutations and combinations in the art form, the Sankirtana took on a well-developed, matured form during the reign of King Bhagyachandra.

The Nat-Sankirtana that is being adopted in Manipur is derived from the Naam Prachar Kirtan that was introduced by Shri Cheiteinya Mahaprabhu in Nabadweep, West Bengal. The Nat-Sankirtana that we now have is an amalgamation of the indigenous Meitei *sur*, *raga* and *ragini* that was formerly developed by Rajarshri Bhagyachandra and has all the ingredients of a local flavour and fervour.

Radha Govindaji's *Sandhya Arati* song:

Shri Radha Govinda Arati samoye
 Khol Kartal dhani mangala gaoye
 Jai Jai kalaraba Vaishnav nikare
 Koi koi nachata koi taal dhare
 Duhu mukha sundara joti nirakhiye
 Lajita nishakar gaganahi rolla
 Nila pitabash shovita duhu aange
 Duhu tanu bhasalla prem tarange
 Duhu mukha madhupan noyanna chakor
 Sadai bansha kore narsinghero nantore

ENGLISH RENDERING

This is a *prarthana* (prayer) song. The *prarthana* renders that there is Radha and Lord Krishna and all the devotees have gathered there and are singing songs in praise of Radha and Lord Krishna. The devotees are singing the

hymns of God very loudly to express their happiness and exultation. Some devotees are dancing madly as if they are in a state of trance to express their utter devotion to the almighty. Some devotees are playing various musical instruments to show their devotion. It is said here that as we look at the idols of Radha and Lord Krishna, we can visualize a kind of aura behind them. Their faces are shining so brightly and exuberantly, as if there is honey dripping from their eyes which is kind of spreading peace and love all around them. And everybody is enjoying this state of transient peace and transcendental love by worshipping and soaking themselves in praise of Radha and Lord Krishna (Translation mine).

‘GOURI’ AS A CULTURAL SIGNIFIER:

The ‘Gouri’ tradition lies at the intersection between the oral and the written, the elite and the popular. Once a flourishing tradition, ‘Gouri’ can be scripted as an ideological exercise, encouraging participatory culture of the womenfolk who gather at the nearby temple every evening to sing the hymns of God. This tradition incorporates the potential for female gathering or congregation for spiritual practice. Spirituality refers to the deep redefinition of one’s identity and it has been perceived that the observers can also participate in the singing of hymns. It is a kind of spiritual dynamic.

The cultural practice of Gouri’s growth and development, its depletion, all can be weaved together into a narrative of people, places and situations which includes the observation and examination of the cultural activity and of the implications of this practice and its relevance in Manipuri society. Studying ‘Gouri’ as a kind of spiritual dynamic, we can foster its cultural aesthetic which can present complex issues and offer space for understanding and analysis of Manipuri culture.

The term ‘culture’ or ‘cultural’ needs to be heard as an invocation of an analysis that has issues of political critique at its heart. Better than ‘cultural’ alone, the term ‘cultural survival’ serves to illuminate Butler’s central thesis (Butler 1990, 139; see also Bell 1999). This term goes some way to insisting that ‘performativity’ must be analyzed alongside political relations. According to Bell (2017, 18), to take part in the cultural narrative of gender is to obtain one’s own ‘cultural survival’ in a world where genders are distinct, hierarchically related and heteronormatively organized. The

ritualistic practice of 'Gouri' is often also referred to as *Sayanha Sandhya* and it starts from around 6 p.m. till 8:24 p.m. and this auspicious temporality is known as *Sayanha*. The anecdote goes like this- on the onset of evening, after Radhika returned back from *Atalika* (Vrindavan), she yearns and pines for Lord Krishna inside the temple-stead. After returning she sent her friends (*sakhi*) with sweets (*sandesh*), betelnut leaves and sandalwood sprinkled garland to be given to Lord Krishna as a token of her immense love and to fix her clandestine rendezvous with her beloved Krishna. Lord Krishna, in response to Radhika's invitation sent back some flower offering (*nirmal*) and *prasad* (offerings) to Radhika's friends (*sakhi*) giving a positive response to her call. Radhika received the flower offering (*nirmal*) and *prasadi* with utmost love and reverence. On the other hand, Krishna was milking the cow in the evening. After that, his mother Yashoda bathed both Krishna and Balaram and took them to their father Nandaraj. Nandaraj took both his sons Balaram and Krishna to the palace *Raj Darbar* (Court Hall) and made them watch different events. This is how the story initiates.

The embodied ritualistic practice of 'Gouri' became the mode of verbal and symbolic collective consciousness of the people of Manipur. Most of the songs sung are rendered in Bengali, though in some temples in Imphal, Manipuri songs are also sung. It is often said that the language used is not entirely Bengali. It is a dialect that originated in old Bengali language. According to Oja Konjengbam Toyiama, the dialect is called *Shour Shreni* and was spoken in Nabadwip, West Bengal. This repository of rituals concerning 'Gouri' in Manipur is now in a state of depletion. Hardly, ten (10) temples in some localities in the Imphal area are regularly performing this ritual every evening.

SIGNIFYING 'GOURI' AS AN INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE:

According to Singh, "Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) is the heritage of physical property and intangible traits of a group or society that are transmitted from past generations, preserved in the present and are given the advantage of future generations" (2011). UNESCO's 2003 Convention for the safeguarding of the ICH puts forward "five broad 'domains', such as oral traditions and expressions, which include language as a medium of the intangible cultural heritage; performing arts; social practices, rituals and festive affairs; knowledge and practices which are associated

with nature and the universe; and traditional skills like handicraft and artistry”. According to UNESCO (2013), the realm of cultural heritage has, however, significantly changed in the past few years. Cultural heritage, which was traditionally concerned with assortment of objects as well as monuments is now concerned with its broad perception the traditions and living expressions inherited from ancestors and passed on to descendants. According to this viewpoint, ‘Gouri’ is likely to be considered as Intangible Cultural Heritage of Manipur. As stated by UNESCO (2003), it is argued that intangible cultural heritage has its foundation in communities and the persisting activities of members who have particular understanding of traditions, skills and customs of these communities. As a result, Manipur can be classified as rich in ICH and in order to protect such intangible wealth, there is a necessity to find out and record the ICH elements in information designs such as photos, journals, manuals, scripts, interviews records and demonstrative performances.

According to Little, “understanding of the past can be accomplished by studying tangible and intangible heritage that passed through generations” (2006). Moreover, as stated by Koichiro, “intangible cultural heritage serves as a melting pot for creative expressions, which plays a vital role in cultural identity, promotion and creativity, as well in transferring cultural diversity across the global village” (2001). Further, he asserts that cultural heritage also plays an important part in national and international growth, and to promote enduring and harmonious relationship between cultures in the age of globalization, when a large number of the forms of cultural heritage are vulnerable to disappearance. He further observes that “cultural heritage is threatened by cultural standardization, conflict tourism, industrialization, rural exodus migration and environmental deterioration, and that these lead to conflict arising from competition for the scarce resources available” (Koichiro, 2001). According to Gill & Gilson, “no society can flourish without ICH and no development can be sustained in its absence” (1994).

ICH reacts to many of the predicaments that today’s societies are experiencing. The relationship between culture and development should be made aware so as to emphasise the sole importance of intangible cultural heritage to the growth of culture. ICH preserves the ways of life, structure of knowledge and expressions that contribute to the significance of communities. According to UNESCO (2003), ICH is frail and it is

necessary to safeguard it. To safeguard it does not mean to repair intangible cultural heritage in some original or earlier form. Safeguarding ICH focuses on to disseminate knowledge, skills and cultural significance across generations. It aims at spreading intergenerational participation of heritage on top of the typical production of arts like dance, music, instruments and crafts. On the other hand, there exist components of ICH that could perish if not preserved properly. This alarming state is supported by various evidences by the numerous ICH, which include cultural practices, dance and languages being threatened by the state of near extinction. With high risk of extinction, there is urgent need to digitize the cultural performance and ritualistic practice of 'Gouri' and this calls for good policy and ethical considerations. Attempt needs to be made to improve ICH archival maintenance and build fresh approaches for its preservation.

THROUGH THE PRISM OF WOMEN PRACTITIONERS OF 'GOURI':

In what ways, one writes the texts of a 'depleting' cultural practice? According to Punjabi (2012), a collective and critical history of women is yet to be well documented. On the other hand, oral narratives are considered to be an important origin of history and they cover not only recollections but also the space and contradiction formed by memory in the long run, raising the question of how such complications can be effectively examined. Therefore, these were some of the pressing questions that underlined the engagement of women in the cultural practice of 'Gouri'.

PUBLIC SPACE, HERITAGE AND CULTURAL PRODUCTION OF 'GOURI':

If we are to understand space,
We must consider its symbolic
Meaning and its complex
Impact upon behaviour as
It is mediated by the
Cognitive process.

(Harvey 2009, 36).

Public space is of significant importance for people. Along with its meanings, representations and symbols, they are the essential tool to build heritage, make identity and create memories. Many people perform activities like protests, festivals, etc., in these public spaces which are significant in

social life. Public space is the most appropriate spatial system to build up heritage. This temple-stead becomes a public space where people socialize and interact. As a result, in this interaction, the local Manipuri women share during 'Gouri' becomes a motif of socializing, producing platform for social production, such as the ritualistic performance of 'Gouri' that shapes their every day life. Constructing, reconstructing and reconfiguring cultural resources is a complex phenomenon which is nearly a paradoxical idea. Harvey posits that "the right of exercising cultural resources should be guided by the public, as it is an origin of mutual power" (2009).

RITUALIZING THE PRACTICE OF 'GOURI':

Through the medium of 'Gouri', we come to know that ritual is deeply embedded in the everyday lives of the Manipuris, and the ways through which ritual shapes the social life of the adults can be examined. Through the study of various types of events that take place in everyday lives or in ceremonies, it can be observed how the ritual of Gouri includes symbolic actions that are repetitive along with structured behaviour associated with the religious and secular life of the Manipuri (specifically Meitei) older adults. According to Sheylyn Briller and Andrea Sankar, it has been observed that "rituals link people to something beyond the individual through the shared sentiment and meaning that they create" (2011, 6). Anthropologists have long been interested in "what makes rituals meaningful to individuals and to society as a whole" (Briller 2011, 6). They have explored how rituals function in a society, focusing on their cultural objectives, context of performance and the practitioners' function. Though the study of ritual represents a fairly intellectual enterprise, it has nevertheless followed an increasingly complex theoretical trajectory. Right from its origin as a matter of exploration that might give importance to the genesis of religion, it has been redesigned in a significant movement of theoretical concerns from functionalism and structuralism to more culturally and semantically focused viewpoints to make use of semiotics and practice theory.

As Catherine Bell notes, this trajectory cannot be characterized as evolutionary. Rather, many scholars have continued to make use of a diverse heritage of theoretical approaches, and given the cross-disciplinary nature of ritual analysis, even the earliest theoretical positions still find a place in contemporary studies of ritual (Bell 1987). There emerges a discernible

trend which characterizes the present concerns of ritual analysis. According to Brown (2003), “the study of ritual is being made less in terms of what it can say about matters other than ritual (mythology, religion or society) and more for what ritual intrinsically represents or achieves. Recent scholarship has approached ritual as a dynamic and substantive mode of human activity that may be instrumental not only in reflecting but also generating, reformulating or challenging cultural values.” The study of ritual has been transmuted into the realm of an interdisciplinary enterprise. Ritual studies have been invested with a more comprehensive systematic vocabulary. A particular example is the arrival of a performance strategy to the study of ritual, or say, a reinterpretation of ritual as performance.

Some archaeologists with the means to access detailed historical or ethno-historical origins continue to consider rituals as the enactment of religious principles or myths. Others have believed it to be a form of human action. The experience of ritual and ritual symbolism encourages social orders and primary worldviews.

CONCLUSION:

Thus, the aspect of ‘Gouri’ carries a significant relevance which is critical to theoretically reexamine about what Manipuri history is comprised of. According to Lor & Britz (2004), although the objectives of digitization cover the preservation and circulation intangible heritage, and to promote nation-building and appreciation of cultural diversity through an understanding of the history and culture of the Meiteis, there remains several ethical concerns which are related to such initiatives. This is the spiritual journey to interpret the eternal world which are revealed through external symbols such as songs or hymns to God which is the aesthetic portrayal of the primary concerns. So, the new approach to understand this cultural practice is associated not only with a comprehensive idea about the specific movement in question, but also bring up the difficulties to set up cultural practices of Manipuri historiography.

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