
A Critical Analysis of the Literary Narratives of Bishnupriya Manipuri Culture in Tripura with Special Reference to Raas Leela Utsav

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Paper Received on 10-11-2025, Accepted on 20-12-2025

Published on 21-12-25; DOI:10.36993/RJOE.2025.10.4.557

Abstract

Research Objective: The study examines the diminishing status of one of the most sacred cultural and devotional performances of the Bishnupriya Manipuri community. Once regarded as a symbol of spiritual identity and artistic excellence, the Raas Leela is now facing serious challenges due to modernization, economic constraints, and a decline in intergenerational transmission.

Research Problem: The traditional folk music of the indigenous people of Tripura includes the Raas Leela. The classical dance form of the Hindu Manipuris of Tripura is considered one of the distinctive dance forms. As times change, preserving traditional practices like the Raas Leela dance faces several challenges. With limited funds for costumes and performances, it is becoming increasingly difficult to keep the tradition alive.

Research Methodology: The research adopts a qualitative methodology, utilizing interviews with twenty (n = 20) participants, two focus group discussions, and document and media analysis to explore the underlying causes of decline and the possibilities for revival.

Research Findings: The findings reveal that reduced youth participation, financial hardship, loss of traditional knowledge, weakened community involvement, and inadequate government support are the primary factors threatening the survival of the art form. At the same time, the study identifies renewed efforts among younger

generations to revive Raas Leela through digital platforms, local cultural programs, and educational initiatives.

Conclusion: Preserving this art form requires collective community action, institutional recognition, and the integration of traditional and modern approaches. This study not only contributes to an understanding of the socio-cultural transformation of Bishnupriya Manipuri society but also emphasizes the urgent need to safeguard its intangible cultural heritage through sustainable preservation strategies. For the Bishnupriya Manipuris, Raas Leela holds deep meaning beyond dance; it is a significant part of their culture and reflects their deep devotion to Lord Krishna. Every step in the Raas Leela performance and every song serves as a way to connect with Lord Krishna and Radha Rani, making it a spiritual and meaningful tradition.

Keywords: Raas Leela Art-Form; Bishnupriya Manipuri Community; Krishna Bhakti; Cultural Identity.

1. Introduction

Bishnupriya Manipuri Raas Leela dance is a central festival within their community. This dance represents Krishna's playful stories or Radha's profound love for Devki Nandan. It is the soul of the Bishnupriya Manipuri community. Unlike ordinary dances, Raas Leela is a profound expression of devotion that brings divine stories to life. The dancers prepare themselves in vibrant colours, and each note of music indicates with Krishna's playfulness and Radha's devotion. It acts as a heartfelt prayer and tells a love story that goes beyond words. This is the true beauty of Raas Leela, a form of worship that brings all its participants (dancers & audiences) to immerse themselves in these touching tales.

Raas Leela is a beautiful dance representing divine love that is performed by Lord Krishna, Radhika and the Gopis (cowherd girls) in Brindavan. This dance illustrates their pure devotion and the soul's desire for meeting each other. This occasion celebrates love and spirituality overflowing with joy, music, and Krishna's playful charm of his life. It symbolizes selfless devotion and eternal love for God. Raasleela dance is not simply an entertaining performance; it narrates the stories of Lord Krishna, Radha or Radhika, and the Gopis. The dancers perform in circles,

singing about Krishna's divine love and playful nature. These figures are historically and mythologically linked to Mathura and Brindavan.

This celebration goes beyond the level of entertainment; it enhances spiritual connection among participants. For the Bishnupriya Manipuri community, every performance feels like a festival. Raas Purnima is celebrated on the full moon day of the month of Kartik & also some other tithis. The origins of Raasleela are based on narratives found in the Bhagavata Purana (Srimad Bhagavatam), which describe Krishna's childhood in Brindavan & his divine love for Radha and his playful Leela or lilas (divine acts). When Vaishnavism, devotion to Lord Vishnu or Lord Krishna reached Manipur around the 15th century, the Bishnupriya Manipuris were inspired with Raasleela as their own.

In the Bishnupriya Manipuri community, people keep Krishna's stories alive in a beautiful way. They tell these tales in their own language, making them feel close to their hearts. They also wear traditional clothes that show their culture and perform in unique styles that reflect who they are. This mixture of language, tradition, and art makes Krishna's stories more than just something from the past. They are a special part of their lives today & shared with love and pride by everyone who hears or sees them through this Bishnupriya Manipuri Raas Leela dance festival. The prime elements of Bishnupriya Manipuri Raasleela include holy dance movements, devotional songs, and brilliant expressions of love and devotion. The dancers often portraying Lord Krishna, Radha and the Gopis, dance move in circular patterns, symbolizing unity and divine love. The performance represents the spiritual connection between the divine and devotees through the celebrating themes of purity and devotion.

1.2. Raas Leela dance and its Forms

The movements are smooth and graceful & very gentle. Their dance expressions convey these stories without words, embodying devotion in every step. All dancers move gracefully, forming soft, circular patterns that bring everyone together in harmony. The Bishnupriya Manipuri Raas Leela mainly features female performers, who represent the divine relationships with Lord Krishna. These dancers portray the roles of Radha and the Gopis in the performances. Even though Raas Leela expresses different types of love, such as Sakhya Ras (friendship), Vatsalya Ras (parental love) and Madhurya Ras (romantic love), the dancers are mostly women.

Table 1

Types of Raas Leela and their unique significance

Types	Description
<i>Maharaas</i>	Maharaas is explained in 10 th chapter (Sharat Skandha highlights Krishna's playful and divine activities during the beautiful autumn season in Brindavan) of the Bhagavata Purana depicting Krishna dancing with the Gopis under a moonlit sky, symbolizing divine love and unity every in the month of Kartik.
<i>Kunja Raas</i>	Kunja Ras shows the love between Krishna and Radha in a quiet forest. It's simple and beautiful, focusing on their deep connection in a peaceful setting.
<i>Basant Raas</i>	Performed during spring, it embodies renewal and joy. This version often draws from Jayadeva's Gita Govinda.
<i>Nitya Raas</i>	A daily offering of devotion, representing Krishna's omnipresence in our lives.
<i>Diba Raas</i>	The newest form of Manipuri Raas Leela, introduced in the 1940s. Unlike the traditional night time Raas performances, it is performed during the day.

They represent Lord Krishna and the female devotees who share a spiritual connection with him. Raas Leela includes different forms & each with its own charm. At the heart of Bishnupriya Manipuri classical dance, which was even practiced by Rabindranath Tagore in Shantiniketan, Raslila celebrates the spiritual love between Lord Krishna and Radha, bringing divine stories to life through captivating performances.

1.3. Importance of Raas Leela among the Bishnupriya Manipuris

For the Bishnupriya Manipuri community, Raslila holds deep meaning beyond dance. It is a big part of their culture and shows their deep love for Lord Krishna. Every step in the Bishnupriya Manipuri Raslila performance and song in Raslila is a way to connect with Krishna and Radha, making it a spiritual and meaningful tradition. Musicians, dancers and viewers feel a strongly connected during the dance performance. Raas Leela is shared through generations, keeping traditions alive. The songs in Bishnupriya Manipuri Raslila are primarily sung in Brajabali, Bengali, Sanskrit (Devanagari) and Bishnupriya Manipuri language deeply resonating with listeners.

- i. ***Colourful Costumes:*** The girls portraying Radha and the Gopis wear traditional costumes called *Pollei* & *Meikhmbi* in Bishnupriya Manipuri Raslila, which are bright cylindrical skirts adorned with mirrors and

embroidery and full of golden ornaments. Krishna typically wears a golden yellow dhoti complemented by a peacock feather crown and ornaments.

- ii. ***Soulful Music:*** The music forms the heart of Raas Leela, featuring instruments like; Dak (drum or pung) - sets the rhythm and dominates all the Tals (rhythms), flute - favorite instrument of Krishna played by the musicians during the performance.
- iii. ***Kartal*** (cymbals) are used to maintain the rhythm and highlight the movements, bringing a lively, rhythmic touch to the performance.
- iv. ***Manjila*** (mini cymbals) – are struck together quickly to create a sharp, vibrant sound.

Figure 1

A glimpse of the Raas Leela Art-Form (Kumari Raas) in Bishnupriya Manipuri Culture



2. Theoretical Background

The Manipuri classical dance is more than just a dance for the Bishnupriya Manipuri community in Tripura; it is a living testimony to the spiritual heritage, history, art, and unity of the culture. It is a celebration that unites people through rhythm and movement, symbolizing their deep bond with nature, community and faith. The study aims to understand the historiography and literary narratives of Bishnupriya Manipuri Culture in Tripura and through critically analyzing the Maha Raas Leela. The primary objective of this study is to explore and understand the

Bishnupriya Manipuri Raasleela as one of the most sacred and aesthetically rich traditional art forms of the Bishnupriya Manipuri community. The Raasleela represents not only a religious performance dedicated to Lord Krishna and Radha but also a profound reflection of the community's cultural identity, spirituality, and artistic excellence. Through this study, an attempt is made to examine the historical evolution, structural components, musical patterns, costumes, gestures, and symbolic meanings embedded in the performance. The analysis aims to document these artistic and cultural aspects systematically to ensure that future generations can recognize and appreciate their heritage in its authentic form.

Another major aim of the current study is to identify the current challenges faced by practitioners and communities in preserving this age-old art form. With rapid modernization, urban migration, and the growing influence of global popular culture, traditional practices like the Raasleela face neglect and decline. Younger generations are becoming less involved due to lack of awareness, limited institutional support, and reduced financial incentives. This study, therefore, seeks to analyze the social and economic factors contributing to this situation and to emphasize the urgent need for preservation efforts that can revive interest and participation in this classical performance tradition.

3. Scope and Significance of the Study

The analysis also intends to explore methods of preservation and promotion suited to contemporary times without diluting the essence of the tradition. This includes suggesting strategies such as integrating Raasleela studies into cultural education, organizing community workshops, government and NGO involvement, documentation through digital media, and supporting local artists through cultural grants and recognition. The objective is not only to preserve the form as static cultural artifacts but also to revitalize it as a living tradition that continues to evolve while retaining its spiritual and aesthetic purity.

Furthermore, the research aims to highlight the cultural and intercultural value of Bishnupriya Manipuri Raasleela. As one of the unique representations of devotional art, it connects faith, music, dance, and storytelling into a harmonious expression of divine love. By analyzing its narrative and performative aspects, the study seeks to promote a broader understanding of its relevance in Indian classical art heritage and its potential contribution to cultural tourism and inter-community dialogue.

Ultimately, the objective of this analytical study is to create awareness and appreciation of the Bishnupriya Manipuri Raasleela at both local and global levels.

Preservation is not merely about conserving the art form's external appearance but also about nurturing the values, discipline, and devotion that it embodies. By documenting, analyzing, and recommending sustainable preservation strategies, this study hopes to contribute to the long-term safeguarding of this unique cultural treasure, ensuring that it continues to inspire devotion, artistic creativity, and cultural pride for generations to come.

4. The Research Problem

The traditional folk music of the indigenous people of Tripura includes the Raas Leela, the classical dance form of the Hindu Manipuris of Tripura is considered as one of the distinctive dance forms. As the times changes, preserving traditional practices like Raas Leela dance faces challenges. With limited funds for costumes and performances, it's becoming harder to keep the tradition alive. The Bishnupriya Manipuri Raasleela is one of the most sacred and culturally significant dance-dramas rooted in Vaishnavism, depicting the divine love of Lord Krishna and Radha. However, despite its spiritual depth and artistic elegance, this traditional art form is facing a gradual decline and is at risk of extinction. Several social, economic, cultural, and institutional factors contribute to this alarming situation.

One of the major reasons is the lack of awareness and interest among the younger generation. With the spread of modern entertainment media, such as television, cinema, and social platforms, traditional performances have lost their audience appeal. Young people are increasingly influenced by globalized culture and have little understanding of the values and discipline embedded in Raasleela. As a result, fewer youths are learning or performing it, leading to a break in the chain of transmission from one generation to the next.

Economic hardship and lack of financial support are significant challenges. The artists and instructors involved in performing and teaching Raasleela often do so voluntarily or with minimal payment. There are very few institutional frameworks or government schemes to provide monetary incentives, infrastructure, or recognition to these traditional performers. Due to financial insecurity, many talented artists are forced to take up other professions, leaving behind their artistic practice. This has severely affected the continuity and quality of the art form. Much of the knowledge about Raasleela; its choreography, music, costumes, and rituals have been orally transmitted. Because of this, there is a lack of standardized written records or academic research. The scarcity of scholarly work and lack of inclusion of Bishnupriya Manipuri art in cultural curricula have also contributed to its marginalization within mainstream Indian classical traditions.

5. Research Objectives

- i. To understand the factors behind the gradual decline of the Bishnupriya Manipuri Raas Leela Art-Form.
- ii. To identify the systematic pathways for the preservation of the Bishnupriya Manipuri Raas Leela Art-Form.

6. Research Methodology

The present study is a qualitative in nature based on both historical and descriptive approaches and secondary data available. The study will provide a good inside into the history and also the present status of the Bishnupriya Manipuri ethnic community in Tripura giving a brief knowledge about the socio-cultural status. The present study adopts a qualitative research methodology to understand the gradual decline of the Bishnupriya Manipuri traditional Raas Leela art form. Since the focus of this research lies in exploring the perceptions, experiences, and meanings attached to this art form by the community and practitioners, a qualitative approach is most suitable. This method allows an in-depth understanding of the social, cultural, and emotional factors influencing the survival of Raas Leela in the present context.

The study follows a descriptive and interpretative design within the qualitative framework. It aims to describe the lived experiences of artists, instructors, and community elders while interpreting the underlying reasons for the art form's decline. Data has been collected using multiple qualitative techniques to ensure depth and richness of information: interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), participant observation, and document and media analysis. A purposive sampling method was employed to select participants who possess direct knowledge and experience related to the Raasleela art form. Twenty (N=20) participants were chosen, including senior gurus, temple authorities, cultural activists, and youth members. The diversity of participants ensured that multiple viewpoints, traditional, administrative, and generational were represented. The data was analyzed using thematic analysis.

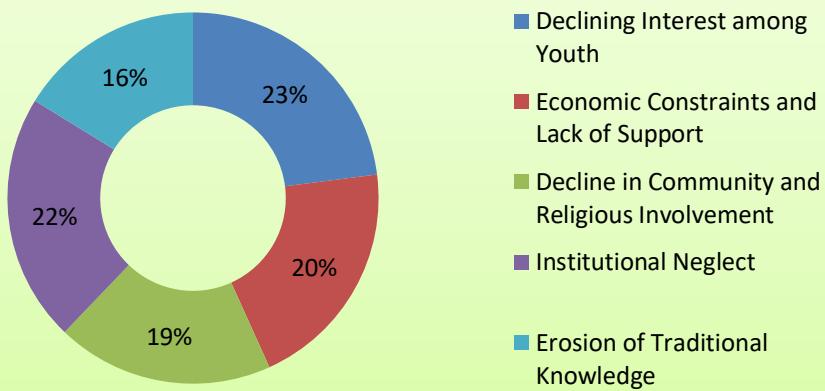
7. Findings of the Study

The study aimed to understand the reasons behind the gradual decline of the Bishnupriya Manipuri Raas Leela art form and identify pathways for its preservation. Data collected from twenty ($n=20$) participants, two focus group discussions, and archival materials revealed multiple interrelated causes, perceptions, and potential solutions.

Figure 2

Chart representation of factors impacting the Raas Leela Art-Form

Factors Impacting Raas Leela Art-Form Among Bishnupriya Manipuris'



- i. **Declining Interest among Youth:** One of the most significant findings is the reduction in youth participation. Around 85% of respondents observed that the younger generation is losing connection with traditional art forms like Raasleela.
- ii. **Economic Constraints and Lack of Support:** Approximately 75% of participants cited economic difficulties as a key barrier.
- iii. **Erosion of Traditional Knowledge:** About 60% of the participants expressed concern that the authentic form of Raas Leela is being diluted.
- iv. **Decline in Community and Religious Involvement:** Nearly 70% of participants mentioned that community participation has reduced over the past few decades.
- v. **Institutional Neglect:** A striking 80% of respondents emphasized that government and cultural institutions have failed to recognize or promote the Bishnupriya Manipuri Raas Leela adequately.
- vi. **Divergent Generational Perspectives:** Data from the focus group discussions show a generation gap.
- vii. **Emerging Hope for Revival:** Despite the challenges, there are positive signs. Some young artists are beginning to use YouTube, Facebook, and community

festivals to promote Raasleela. There is growing interest in cultural documentation and teaching programs among schools and local organizations.

8. Discussion and Suggestions

The findings of this study reveal that the Bishnupriya Manipuri Raasleela, once a vibrant expression of spirituality and cultural devotion, is now facing a steady decline due to social, economic, and generational changes. Based on the opinions of artists, teachers, and community members, the following suggestions are proposed to ensure its preservation, revival, and sustainable growth.

- i. ***Establishment of Cultural Training Centres:*** To preserve the authentic dance forms, music, and devotional practices of Raasleela, dedicated training centres should be established in regions inhabited by Bishnupriya Manipuri communities.
- ii. ***Integration into School and College Curriculum:*** Including the basics of Bishnupriya Manipuri culture and Raasleela in school and college syllabi can generate awareness from a young age.
- iii. ***Financial and Institutional Support:*** Economic hardship is one of the major reasons for the decline of this art form.
- iv. ***Digital Documentation and Archiving:*** To safeguard traditional knowledge, a comprehensive digital documentation project is essential.
- v. ***Promotion through Media and Social Platforms:*** Younger generations are highly engaged in digital media; hence, Raasleela should be promoted through modern communication tools.
- vi. ***Encouragement of Community Participation:*** Revival efforts must begin at the community level.
- vii. ***Government Recognition and Heritage Protection:*** The Bishnupriya Manipuri Raasleela should be proposed for inclusion under UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage list or similar national heritage programs.
- viii. ***Collaboration between generations:*** Bridging the gap between elders and youth is crucial.

The present study on the gradual decline of the Bishnupriya Manipuri Raasleela art form reveals a complex interaction of cultural, social, and economic factors that have contributed to the fading of one of the community's most sacred and distinctive artistic traditions. Once considered the spiritual heartbeat of Bishnupriya Manipuri society, the Raasleela has gradually lost its prominence due to changing lifestyles, limited institutional support, and declining interest among the younger generation.

Through a qualitative approach involving interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis, this research highlights both the challenges and possibilities associated with preserving this unique art form. The findings indicate that while the devotion and passion of elder artists remain strong, the lack of systemic mechanisms for transmission and recognition threatens the continuity of the tradition:

- i. ***Cultural and Social Realities:*** The study found that urbanization, modernization, and migration have changed the social fabric of the Bishnupriya Manipuri community. Raasleela, which was once a collective religious and cultural celebration, has now become a rare event performed mainly during specific festivals.
- ii. ***Economic and Institutional Gaps:*** Another critical factor identified is the lack of financial and institutional support. Artists often perform voluntarily or at personal expense, without sufficient appreciation or remuneration. The absence of government grants, sponsorships, or inclusion in national cultural schemes has left performers economically vulnerable.
- iii. ***Preservation and Revival Potential:*** Despite these challenges, the research also uncovered signs of resilience and hope. A few young enthusiasts and cultural organizations are beginning to use digital media to revive interest in Raas Leela.

9. Conclusion

In conclusion, the decline of Bishnupriya Manipuri Raas Leela is not merely the loss of an art form; it represents the erosion of a community's identity, collective memory, and devotion. Yet, this decline is not irreversible. With appropriate steps such as establishing cultural academies, ensuring financial aid, integrating the art form into education, and promoting it through modern media the Raas Leela can be revitalized.

Preservation must be viewed not only as the duty of artists but as a shared cultural responsibility involving the community, scholars, policymakers, and the younger generation. By blending tradition with innovation, the Bishnupriya Manipuri Raasleela can continue to flourish as a living testament to the community's spiritual heritage and artistic brilliance. The decline of community participation is another serious concern. In earlier times, Raasleela was not just a performance but a community celebration involving collective effort and devotion. With changing lifestyles, migration, and modernization, community-based cultural events are diminishing. The festivals and temple spaces that once hosted Raasleela

performances are now less frequent or less attended. This disconnection between the art form and the community has weakened its cultural foundation.

Moreover, inadequate governmental and institutional support has accelerated the decline. Compared to other classical dance forms like Bharatanatyam or Kathak, the Bishnupriya Manipuri Raasleela has received very limited recognition at national or international levels. The absence of dedicated cultural centers, preservation programs, and promotion through media has resulted in poor visibility and lack of prestige for the art form. Finally, the influence of modernization and cultural homogenization has eroded traditional values. Younger generations view such performances as out dated or irrelevant to modern society. Without conscious efforts to adapt the presentation of Raasleela to modern audiences while preserving its essence, it risks fading away completely.

The possible extinction of Bishnupriya Manipuri Raasleela is the result of a combination of cultural neglect, economic challenges, lack of institutional support, and generational disinterest. To prevent this, urgent measures must be taken to revive, document, and promote this invaluable cultural heritage through education, community involvement, and governmental initiatives. Only then can this sacred art form survive and continue to inspire devotion and artistic expression for future generations.

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RESEARCH JOURNAL OF ENGLISH (RJOE)

www.rjoe.org.in | Oray's Publications | ISSN: 2456-2696

An International Approved Peer-Reviewed and Refereed English Journal

Impact Factor: 8.373 (SJIF) | Vol. 10, Issue 4 (October, November & Dec;2025)

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