

Rāsmandali as Sacred Performance Space in Manipuri *Jagoi Rās*

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Introduction

Sacred performance spaces have occupied an important place in religious traditions across the world. Unlike ordinary performance venues, sacred pavilions are conceived as ritual environments where the human and divine realms symbolically intersect. Such spaces are not merely architectural structures; they are carefully organized settings that facilitate spiritual participation, collective worship, and the enactment of sacred narratives. Through ritual consecration, symbolic design, and prescribed patterns of movement, sacred performance spaces transform ordinary locations into sites of religious experience. Anthropologists and performance scholars have often noted that ritual spaces function as liminal zones where participants temporarily transcend everyday realities and enter a sacred order of existence.

In the Indian context, the relationship between performance and sacred space has a long history. Classical and folk traditions alike have depended upon specially designated ritual arenas where myths, legends, and divine narratives are enacted.

Across India, sacred pavilions and performance spaces have traditionally served as important venues for the presentation of devotional dance and theatrical traditions. In Kerala, the Koothambalam functions as a traditional temple theatre specifically designed for the presentation of sacred and ritual performances, including Koodiyattam, Chakyar Koothu, and Kathakali (Kumar and Singh 41). In Assam, the Namghar, established through the Vaishnavite tradition of Srimanta Sankardeva, serves as a community prayer hall where Sattriya dance and Bhaona are performed as acts of devotion. Together, these spaces illustrate the close relationship between sacred architecture, religious practice, and the performing arts in India.

Such spaces are intended not merely for spectatorship but for participation in religious experience. The performance arena thus becomes an extension of the sacred landscape associated with the deity being worshipped.

Among the Meiteis of Manipur, the concept of sacred performance space is evident in the *Laibung* of *Lai Haraoba*. The term *Laibung* refers to the ritual ground where the deities (*Lai*) are invoked and their creation narratives are performed through dance, music, and ceremonial acts. Considered the dwelling place of the presiding deity during the festival, the *Laibung* functions as a sacred enclosure where the community collectively

engages with its religious memory and cultural heritage. The performance area is carefully prepared according to ritual prescriptions and becomes a symbolic representation of the cosmos and the ancestral world of the Meiteis. Through the movements of the *Amaibis* and the participation of the community, the *Laibung* transforms into a living sacred space that preserves indigenous knowledge, belief, and identity. The advent of Gauriya Vaishnavism in the eighteenth century and the development of sacred performance space such as the *Rāsmāṇḍalī* in Manipuri *Jagoi Rās* may be understood within this broader cultural tradition in which performance space serves as a medium for devotional and communal experience.

Manipuri *Rās Līlā*, known locally as *Jagoi Rās*, occupies an important place in the cultural and devotional life of Manipur. Emerging from the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava tradition, it was institutionalized during the reign of Maharaja Bhagyachandra, who established it as a collective sacred space for Krishna devotion where music, dance, ritual, and community participation converged. Conceived not merely as a performance tradition but as a shared spiritual practice, *Rās Līlā* brought together performers, devotees, musicians, and spectators in an atmosphere of worship and collective religious experience. Over time, the tradition was further nurtured and refined under the patronage of rulers such as Maharaja Chandrakirti Singh and Maharaja Churachand Singh, whose contributions helped sustain and develop it into a classical tradition distinguished by both spiritual significance and aesthetic sophistication.

What distinguishes *Jagoi Rās* is not only its religious basis but also the way it combines the devotional ideas of the broader *Rās-līlā* tradition with Manipuri movement vocabulary, local performance sensibility, and indigenous ritual practice. Its foundation lies in the *Rāsa-pañcādhyāyī* of the *Śrīmad Bhāgavatam*, where Krishna's dance with the *gopīs* becomes the central image of divine love and surrender. At the same time, the tradition also reflects the ritual and cultural memory of the Meitei people, especially through forms and expressive elements associated with *Lai Haraoba*. This blending of traditions gives *Jagoi Rās* its unique character and makes it more than a devotional performance alone.

The present study focuses on this tradition through the idea of sacred performance space, especially the *Rāsmāṇḍalī*. In Manipuri *Jagoi Rās*, the performance space is not simply a stage for dance; it is shaped and understood as a devotional environment where the sacred presence of Krishna and Radhika is ritually evoked. Whether performed in the Śrī Govindajee Temple or in other Vaiṣṇava temples and temporary *mandaps*, the space is organised in ways that support the devotional mood of the performance. The arrangement of the *Rāsmāṇḍalī*, the role of the idols, the circular movement of the dancers, and the ritual ordering of the performance all contribute to the creation of a sacred atmosphere. This paper therefore examines how *Jagoi Rās* transforms space into devotion and performance into a form of worship.

Vṛndāvana *Bhāva* and the *Rāsmāṇḍalī*

For devotees within the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava tradition, *bhāva*, or devotional mood, is central to the process of spiritual realization, as it enables the devotee to develop an intimate emotional connection with the divine. More than a mere feeling, *bhāva* serves as the foundation upon which deeper devotional and aesthetic experiences are built. Its importance lies in its ability to transform ordinary perception into a spiritually meaningful experience, allowing the devotee to participate emotionally in the divine *līlā*. This understanding finds resonance in aesthetic theory, where *bhāva* is regarded as the source from which *rasa* emerges. As Projesh Banerji explains, the sight of an event constitutes *bhāva*, while the emotional experience arising from it becomes *rasa*; thus, *rasa* originates from *bhāva* and represents its aesthetic culmination (Banerji 57).

Goloka Vṛndāvana is understood in devotional thought as the highest spiritual realm where Krishna eternally resides in His divine form. It is described as a transcendental abode beyond material limitation, where *nitya līlā* continues without interruption. This idea gives Vṛndāvana a meaning that is not merely geographical but deeply spiritual and devotional. In this understanding, the sacredness of Vṛndāvana lies in its atmosphere of divine intimacy, where Krishna, Rādhā, the gopīs, and their associates participate in eternal *līlā*.

This conception is important for *Jagoi Rās* because it shapes the way sacred space is imagined and experienced. The performance space of the *Rāsmāṇḍalī* is not treated as an ordinary physical enclosure. It is spiritually transformed so that devotees may feel as though they are witnessing the divine play in Vrajabhūmi itself. As E. Nilakanta observes, the *Rāsmāṇḍalī* is spiritually reimaged as Vrajabhūmi, where Rādhā, Krishna, and the gopīs enact their eternal play. In this way, the space becomes part of the devotional experience rather than a mere background for performance. (Nila Kanta 67)

The sacredness of this space is further strengthened by its connection to Vṛndāvana *bhāva*, the devotional mood associated with the divine world of Krishna. The *Rāsmāṇḍalī* does not simply represent the idea of Vṛndāvana; it creates a devotional setting in which that sacred reality can be emotionally and spiritually experienced. The performance space, ritual atmosphere, music, and collective devotion work together to evoke this mood.

A crucial aspect of this experience is the *bhāva* cultivated by the devotees themselves. Within the sacred environment of the *Rāsmāṇḍalī*, devotees do not perceive themselves merely as spectators watching a performance. Through prayer, faith, music, and ritual participation, they enter an emotional and spiritual state that draws them closer to the divine world of Krishna and Rādhā. The sacred space supports this transformation by creating an atmosphere conducive to devotion, contemplation, and emotional immersion. As the mood of devotion deepens, the boundaries between the physical setting and the imagined realm of Vṛndāvana become less distinct, allowing devotees to experience a sense of spiritual proximity to the eternal *līlā*. In this way, sacred space

and devotional mood function together, enabling participants to transcend ordinary worldly awareness and enter, however momentarily, the divine realm represented through the performance.

Architecture and symbolism

The *Rāsmāṇḍalī* acquires its significance through the way its architectural form organises devotional meaning within *Jagoi Rās*. It is not simply an enclosure for performance, but a structured sacred space in which physical arrangement and ritual intention work together. The square or circular shape, the four gates, the twelve pillars, and the central *sajya* all contribute to this ordering of space. In this way, the *Rāsmāṇḍalī* is shaped as a performative frame that supports both aesthetic discipline and devotional focus.

The twelve pillars are among the most meaningful elements of this structure. As described in the material, they may be interpreted either as the twelve *sakhīs* and *mañjarīs* or as the twelve sacred forests of *Vṛndāvana*. These interpretations do not remain abstract; they give the enclosure a symbolic relation to the devotional geography of Krishna's *līlā*. The pillars therefore function on two levels at once: they support the architecture physically, and they mark the space as one that belongs to the sacred world evoked in the performance.

The four gates further define the spatial logic of the *Rāsmāṇḍalī*. Their presence gives direction to the enclosure and regulates movement within it. The west gate functions as the principal point of entry and exit for Radha and the *gopīs*, while the other gates carry specific ritual associations depending on the setting and the form of *Rās*. This directional order is important because it shows that the performance space is not neutral. It is consciously arranged so that movement, entry, and exit are all absorbed into the devotional design of the performance.

The *sajya* occupies the inner centre of this sacred arrangement. As the designated place for Krishna and Radhika, it gives visible form to the divine presence at the heart of the performance. The relation between the *sajya*, the pillars, and the gates reveals how the *Rāsmāṇḍalī* unites architecture with devotional purpose. This is the point at which a diagram can be inserted, because the structural logic of the space has already been established and the visual layout would support the analytical discussion that follows.

Sitting arrangement and performance

In many traditional dance and ritual performance traditions across India, seating arrangements are governed by established conventions that reflect religious hierarchy, ritual purity, and functional responsibilities. Such spatial organisation ensures order, preserves sacred decorum, and reinforces the symbolic meanings embedded within the performance environment.

The seating arrangement within the *Rāsmāṇḍalī* of the Govindajee Temple and in local temple or outdoor performances reflects a carefully structured spatial order. It is not arranged casually, but according to ritual hierarchy, performance function, and directional significance. The positions of the principal performers,

accompanists, devotees, and temple authorities are fixed in relation to the four directions of the enclosure. This arrangement gives the performance both discipline and sacred order, and it also helps define the *Rāsmāṇḍalī* as a ritually organised space rather than a neutral stage.

In the Govindajee Temple setting, the arrangement follows a particularly defined pattern, while in local mandaps and open-air performances certain positions are adjusted according to the presence of human performers in the roles of Krishna and Radhika. Even so, the basic principle of directional placement remains the same. The northwest, northeast, southwest, and southern positions carry distinct meanings, and the performers are seated in a way that corresponds to their seniority, function, and relation to the sacred centre.

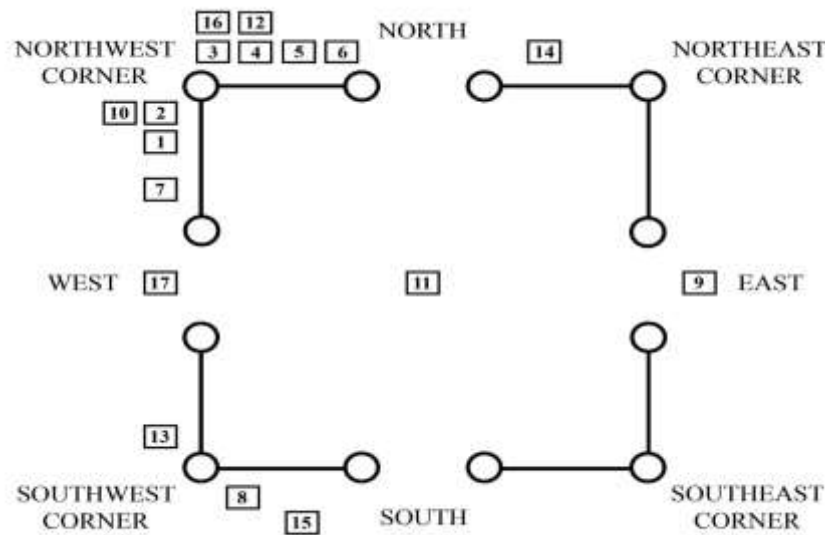


Figure 1. Showing Govindajee Temple sitting arrangement of performers and devotees, circles indicating pillars of *Rāsmāṇḍalī*.

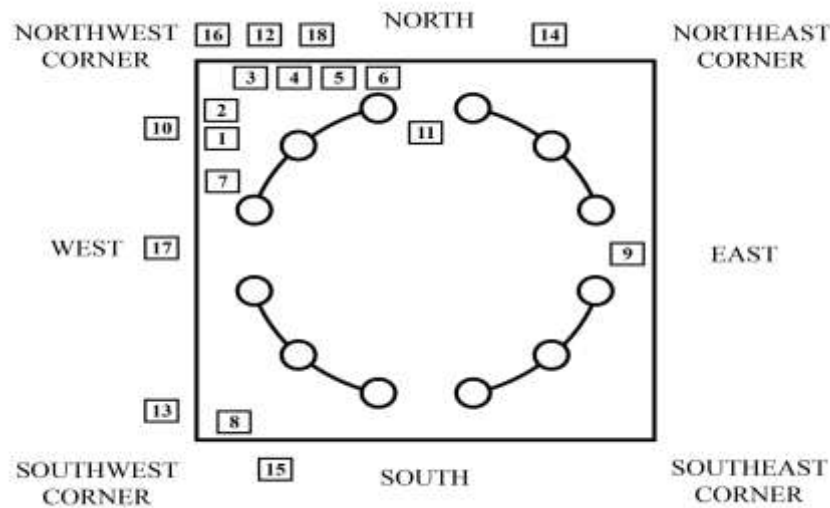


Figure 2. Showing Local mandap sitting arrangement of performers and devotees; rounded circles indicating pillars of Rasmāṇḍalī.

1. Leading *Rāsdhari* sits at the northwest corner, facing east.
2. Second *Rāsdhari* (*Tung-inba*) sits immediately to the left of the leading *Rāsdhari*.
3. Leading *Sūtradhārī* sits at the northwest corner, facing south.
4. Second *Sūtradhārī* (*Tung-inbi*) sits to the left of the leading *Sūtradhārī*.
5. Third *Sūtradhārī* (*Tung-inbi*) sits next to the second *Sūtradhārī*, according to seniority.
6. Banshi Khongba (flutist) sits to the left of the last *Sūtradhārī*, facing south.
7. *Esraj* player sits to the left of the flutist.
8. *Mandap Mapu* sits at the southwest corner, facing north.
9. *Jagoi Ngakpa* sits at the middle of the east gate, just outside the *Rāsmāṇḍalī*.
10. *Arangpham* sits in the northwest region, behind the *Sūtradhārī*, facing south.
11. *Bhadrachakra/sajya* area is placed at the centre of the *Rāsmāṇḍalī* in the Govindajee Temple performance; in local or outdoor settings, the *sajya* is placed near the middle of the northern gate.
12. Female *bhabok* (Vaiṣṇavī devotees) sit behind the *Sūtradhārī* and flutist, facing south.
13. Royal family members, including the Mahārani Rajmata and Brahmin ladies, sit on the right side of the western gate, facing east.

14. Courtiers, pandit *Loishang* members, *Cheirak*, Garot, and *Awang Bhabok* sit in the northeast region, along the right side of the northern gate, facing south.
15. King's royal seat, along with royal attendants, high-ranking Brahmins, and members of the *Nata Pala Loishang*, is placed near the left side of the southern gate, facing north.
16. Queen sits at the northwest, behind the *Sūtradhārī*, facing south toward the king.
17. Govindajee Temple stands outside the western side of the *Rāsmāṇḍalī*, facing east.
18. Parents of Radha and Krishna sit at the northeastern corner in local or outdoor performances, facing south.

Conclusion

Sacred performance spaces have always played a vital role in religious traditions because they provide an environment in which worship, memory, and collective devotion can be experienced together. The *Rāsmāṇḍalī* of Manipuri *Jagoi Rās* exemplifies this relationship between space and spirituality. More than a physical structure, it functions as a consecrated arena where architecture, ritual, music, dance, and devotion converge to recreate the sacred atmosphere of Vṛndāvana. Through its symbolic design and ritual organization, the *Rāsmāṇḍalī* enables devotees to participate emotionally and spiritually in the divine *līlā* of Rādhā and Krishna. Central to this experience is the cultivation of *bhāva*. The devotional mood generated within the sacred enclosure allows participants to move beyond ordinary spectatorship and engage with the performance as an act of worship. As *bhāva* deepens, the performance becomes a shared spiritual experience that unites performers, musicians, and devotees in collective remembrance of the divine. This emotional and devotional participation transforms the *Rāsmāṇḍalī* into a living sacred space where religious faith is continuously renewed.

The enduring vitality of *Jagoi Rās* can be attributed not only to its artistic excellence but also to this strong communal and devotional foundation. By bringing generations together in a shared act of worship, this tradition has preserved its religious significance, cultural identity, and aesthetic heritage. The *Rāsmāṇḍalī* thus remains a powerful symbol of how sacred performance spaces sustain collective memory, strengthen community bonds, and ensure the continuity of living traditions across time.

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