



Divine Narratives on Wheels: Iconographic Syncretism and Vaishnavite Devotion in Manipur's Kang Chingba

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1. Introduction

Manipur is often described as a land of festivals, possesses a religious heritage that is both ancient and culturally rich. One of the most important festivals of the Vaishnavite calendar is the Kang Chingba, a Manipuri version of the Ratha Yatra, which involves the ritual drawing of massive chariots (Kangs) through the streets (ShodhKosh Journal, 2022; Singh, n.d.). This festival is not merely an adaptation of the Jagannath cult of Odisha but a unique expression of Manipuri cultural synthesis, where the visual narratives carved onto the panels of the chariot tell a story of divine intervention and community identity. The Kang Chingba festival, particularly the Konung Kang Chingba where the royal chariot is drawn from the palace, serves as a mobile canvas of spiritual storytelling that captures the essence of the Meitei religious experience (Singh, n.d.). The iconographic theme of the Kang is a deliberate theological message. Each motif from the elephant king Gajendra offering lotus to Lord Vishnu, to the cosmic reclining of Sheshashayi Vishnu, contains a dimension of Gaudiya Vaishnavite philosophy within a visual medium accessible to all who witness the procession. While the chariot travels through the Imphal Valley, it assumes a temporal presence of the transcendent world, allowing the devotees to interact with the transcendence by looking at it (darshan) and participating in its construction. At the same time, the pulling of the Kang turns into the act of worship, community solidarity, and memory. Therefore, the chariot serves multiple functions at once: it is a theological text, a communal rite, and a mobile archive of the centuries-long interaction between the Meiteis and Vaishnavism. In such a way, the Kang represents a kind of "rolling temple" – the temple whose faithful worshippers do not gather in a certain sacred place but gather in motion within the community's landscape. Indeed, it is within the syncretic aspect that the true importance of the festival can be seen. Manipuri Vaishnavism was not imposed on a passive population but rather came into contact with an existing complex religion based on Sanamahism, worship of ancestors, and the traditions of Lai Haraoba. Thus, we can see a tradition that is both Gaudiya Vaishnavite and uniquely Meitei. Moreover, the elements of the traditional religion of the Manipuris did not disappear and can be observed in the symbolism or representation of the Kang, the structure of the festival, and in the devotion culture. The key goals of this study are to determine the theological importance of the iconographic motives of the Kang and to explore the syncretic aspects of the festival as a vessel of collective memory (Manna, 2020; Eshika, 2023). Before the establishment of Vaishnavism, Manipur's religious landscape was shaped primarily by Sanamahism and the ritual festival of Lai Haraoba, dedicated to the Umang Lai (ancestral deities) (Ritual Festival, 2024;



Premchandra, 2024). The worship of Sanamahi, the household deity, and Pakhangba, the royal ancestor and deity of the throne, was central to Meitei spiritual and social life (Ryzhakova, 2023; The Myth of Origin, 2019).

2. Visual Narratives on the Kang

The Kang chariot that is used in the Kang Chingba ritual represents an epitome of iconographic synthesis. The chariot is basically a mobile temple whose ornamentations and images or illustrations help convey complicated theological themes. In this regard, the chariot can be seen as an embodiment of a "theology in motion."

2.1 The Concept of "Theology in Motion"

The term "theology in motion" captures the dynamic nature of Manipuri Vaishnavite devotion. Unlike a static temple deity, the deities enshrined on the Kang are physically moved by pulling with rope tied to the kang by the community, and the visual narratives on the chariot panels come alive as they roll through the valley. This movement represents the descent of the divine into the mundane world, that makes the divine deity accessible to ordinary people and temporarily turns an ordinary public road into a sacred religious space. These are not mere decorative elements, but thoughtfully selected theological statements based on the essential theological principles of Gaudiya Vaishnavism. Divine grace, the primacy of the devotee-God relationship, and the eternal cosmic order. The chariot thus simultaneously serves as a vehicle for the deity, a catechism for devotees, and an expression of the community's collective theological imagination. Devotee who pulls the rope, watches the procession, or presents offering often sweets, flowers and fruits takes part in the joint act of theological proclamation.

2.2 Detailed Analysis of Key Iconographic Motifs

2.2.1 Gajendra Moksha: The Theology of Total Surrender

The depiction of Gajendra Moksha, the liberation of the elephant king from the clutches of a crocodile, occupies an important place in the iconography of Kang. With regard to the theology of Gaudiya Vaishnavism, the story is meant to convey the idea of Prapatti or total surrender to God (Singh, 2018). The motif depicts the scene in which the elephant, after being completely exhausted, presents a lotus flower to God, who descends on Garuda to rescue him. The symbolism on the Manipuri Kang is meant to communicate the message of divine mercy according to which anyone who surrenders himself to God by sincere devotion will receive his protection, irrespective of spiritual attainment. The idea of total surrender is one of the key themes of the Manipuri interpretation of Vaishnavism wherein Sankirtana is the main means of absolving sins and getting liberated (ShodhKosh Journal, 2022).



Painted on the left side of the Kang (ratha) of Bijoygovinda Temple, 2026

2.2.2 Sheshashayi Vishnu and Garuda: Maintenance of Cosmic Order

The depiction of Sheshashayi Vishnu, who lies upon the multiheaded serpent Shesha in the cosmic ocean, is indicative of Yoga-Nidra as well as the everlasting stability of the cosmos, thus presenting Vishnu as the sustainer of the cosmic order. In the Kang, the presence of this representation is often combined with the figure of Garuda, the eagle mount of Vishnu, which denotes speed and force of divine grace. Thus, both of these figures help in establishing the idea of the cosmos being preserved due to divine will. This idea gave spiritual consistency during the times of turmoil and transition in the history of Manipur where the state was threatened from outside and had undergone some internal restructuring (Roy & Rajkumar, 2017). The presence of Garuda further underscores the significance of the divine mount as a mediator of grace, just like the traditional Meitei practitioners as intermediaries between the people and the divine (Manna, 2020).



Back side of the Shree Govindajee Temple, 2026

2.2.3 Hanuman: The Model of Dasya Bhakti and the Ramayana Legacy

Hanuman's depiction on the Kang reflects the enduring influence of the Ramanandi tradition introduced by King Garibniwaz (Singh, 2018; Singha & Singha, 2022). Hanuman is the epitome of Dasya Bhakti (devotion in the mood of a servant), characterized by selfless service and unwavering loyalty to Lord Rama. In Manipur, the oral and textual traditions of the Ramayana (Ramkatha) have been deeply integrated into the local culture through performance forms like Wari Leeba (storytelling), ensuring that the narrative and ethical content of the Ramayana remain vivid in popular consciousness (Singh, 2017). The iconographic representation of Hanuman carrying Rama and Lakshmana. A complete act of devotion and sacrifice to the Lord. It serves as a model for the devotee: the highest form of spiritual achievement lies not in ascetic withdrawal but in service to the divine and community. This motif also acts as a historical marker reminding participants of Manipur's pluralistic and layered devotional heritage.



Painted on the Right Side of the Kang of Bijoygovinda Temple, 2026



Printed and pasted on the right side of the shree Govindajee Temple, 2026

2.2.4 Vamana Avatar: Divine Descent and the Evolution of Consciousness

The significance of the Vamana Avatar or the avatar of the dwarf form of Vishnu lies in its special importance in the interpretation of the Dasavatar at Kang. The scholarly interpretations have proposed that the series of avatars starting from the aquatic Matsya and ending in the human form indicates a theological theory of evolution (Mishra & Palai, 2021; Gadhavi & Gohel, 2025). Vamana symbolizes the progression of the state of consciousness in the human form that can answer the internal queries related to kindness and compassion (Mishra & Palai, 2021). On Kang, the triumph of Vamana over King Bali symbolizes the divine intervention to restore the balance through wisdom and spirituality and not sheer force, which is in line with the Meitei belief of the king as the protector of dharma.



Right side of the kang of Shri Govindajee Temple, 2026

2.3 Iconography of the Triad: Jagannath, Balabhadra, and Subhadra

The central figures within the Kang are Lord Jagannath, his brother Balabhadra, and sister Subhadra whose images have been derived from the temple at Puri but representations here gives a local flavor. It is believed that Lord Jagannath is an incarnation of Krishna and the worship performed is in connection with the Gaudiya Vaishnavite traditions of leelas (divine plays) (The Jagannatha Temple, 1993). The unique non-human forms of these deities are meant to reflect their transcendental and ineffable nature. In the context of Kang Chingba, these figures represent the "deeper dimensions of Lord Jagannath's worship," where the physical chariot becomes a holy sojourn during which the gods mingle with the community (Beyond Rath Yatra, 2024; Grosnick, 2025). The idol of lord jagannath, balabhadra and subhadra which reside at the right side of the temple of the govinda temples are shifted to the vehicle (kang) on this day, and the Kang serve as a vehicle or moving temple.

2.4 Iconographic Syncretism and Chariot Construction

In and of itself, the creation of the Kang is an example of syncretism. Even though the deity inside it is a Vaishnavite deity, the architectural elements that make up the chariot reflects Meitei aesthetics in almost every aspects. The example of the Kang known as Konung Kang (Palace Chariot) is illustrative in this context because it is the use of local woodworking techniques for the portrayal of Hindu deities and episodes from Purana (Singh, n.d.). As a result of the employment of local crafts for the representation of Vaishnavite imagery, the imagery becomes something familiar to the community, and it thus becomes possible to say that it is both Meitei and Hindu in essence. Thus, the aesthetic syncretism makes sure that the chariot is not seen as an foreign element imposed upon the community but as an organic outgrowth of the community's culture and devotion.

3. Syncretism and Collective Memory: The Modern Legacy of Kang Chingba

The Kang Chingba remains an influential symbol for community cohesion and cultural persistence in present day Manipur. Although aspects of the rituals associated with this event have been influenced by many years of Vaishnavite traditions, the fundamental role of the event as a repository of memory and



a platform for solidarity speaks of something far beyond doctrine, but rather speaks to the people's determination to create a shared identity.

3.1 Kang Chingba as a Vessel for Community Unity and Resilience

Apart from its theological meaning, the pulling of Kang or Kang Chingba is essential for social peace. This ritual involves a collective process that joins different sections of Meitei society irrespective of their location, profession, or generation and reflects the "age-old concept of unity" (Eshika, 2023). Kirtan Palas created for the celebration of the festival are places for collective performance which help create social bonds and transmit devotional tradition from one generation to another (ShodhKosh Journal, 2022). Given the current social and political situation in Manipur, the festival represents an archive of historical tales and reminds people of the vision of their kings and strong culture (Singha & Singha, 2022). Besides, the act of pulling Kang reflects the historical moment when the Manipuri kings first publicly proclaimed their devotion.

It also functions as a living document of the negotiation of the syncretism of Sanamahism and Vaishnavism, as it happens every year when preparations for the festival take place and then when the actual festival comes around. In most Meitei households in Manipur, the worship of Vaishnavite deities exists alongside the worship of indigenous deities such as Sanamahi (Eshika, 2023; Singh, 2024). It is seen not as a contradiction but as complementarity – as "a beautiful blend which is characteristic of the spirituality of Imphal valley" (Eshika, 2023). The Kang Chingba is the festival which exemplifies this syncretism in the most spectacular fashion possible. In an area which has often been divided by identity politics, it provides a blueprint of inclusive cultural identity based on a history of coexistence. The Kang is not merely a vehicle of the gods but of the community's soul, always striving for a greater sense of communion and spiritual awakening.

4. Conclusion

The Kang Chingba festival of Manipur is much more than a mere religious festival; it is an artistic representation of iconographic syncretism and a reflection of cultural inventiveness by the Meiteis. The cultural identity of the Manipuris as a unique blend of the indigenous culture and the Gaudiya Vaishnavite doctrine came about through the historical development of Vaishnavism from its humble beginning under King Kiyamba to its zenith under Rajarshi Bhagyachandra. The "theology in motion" represented in the iconographic motifs of Gajendra Moksha, Sheshashayi Vishnu, Hanuman, and Vamana Avatar provides the community with the ideal way of surrender, orderliness, and devotion. The chariot moves through the streets of the Imphal valley, carries with it the hopes, prayers, and unified identity of a people whose spirituality is strongly grounded in the sacred myths of their culture. The pre-Vaishnavite Meitei practices of the Lai Haraoba, Sanamahism, and the aesthetic sensibilities of ritual practices have been incorporated rather than erased by the Vaishnavite revolution, resulting in a religious culture that is at once orthodox and unique. This merging of the native and devotional elements constitutes the essence of Manipuri identity, wherein the Kang is no mere vehicle of deities but a manifestation of the people's spiritual creativity.

Ultimately, the Kang Chingba stands as a profound symbol of the Meitei people's ability to integrate diverse spiritual influences into a cohesive and enduring cultural expression. In the period when religious identity faces many challenges, the festival proves to possess such vital features as collective



memory retention, complex theology visualization, and communion representation by means of common chariot pulling. Such persistent manifestation of syncretic practices as dual worship, incorporation of Meitei rituals into Vaishnavite rites, and Meitei aesthetic principles embodied in the structure of the Kang proves the fact that the festival is not merely a thing of the past but a living tradition. Dialogue between traditional Meitei customs and Vaishnavism is what makes the Manipuri religious experience unique. The Kang Chingba is what makes the Manipuri experience religiously "Manipuri." Therefore, study of such living syncretic manifestations should be considered an act of cultural preservation. The Kang Chingba is certainly worth of further investigation due to being a remarkable example of a devotional tradition that has proved to remain theologically relevant and culturally innovative for several centuries.

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