

MANIPURI NATA SANKIRTANA AS A MAHAYAJNA

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Manipur University, Manipur**Voice of Research**Volume 5, Issue 3
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ISSN 2277-7733**Abstract**

The NataSankirtana style of singing which was introduced during the reign of RajarshiBhagyachandra (1763-1798 A.D.). The great masters and scholars of that period composed and sang the padavali strictly after the Bhagavata tradition and other major Vaishnavite text and based the composition also on the traditional Ragas and Raginis of classical music tradition. Modern research has discovered a lot of regional overtones in the architecture of the particular Ragas and Raginis. The Manipuris call the NataSankirtana singing their own and it is clearly a form of collective prayer, a Mahayajna as they call it, lasting for about 5 hours at a stretch with a lot of rituals, movements and rhythmic pattern, strictly after the vaishnavite faith. NataSankirtana is a composite version of music, dance and tala; a Sangeet in the true sense of the term. It is also DrishyaKarya, a poem made visible. NataSankirtana to the followers of GoudiyaVaishnavism is a form of worship. It is considered as a Mahayajna (complete sacrifice). The Vaishnav architects trace its origin to the aesthetics and philosophy of ShrimadBhagavata. In ShrimadBhagavata the only merit in Kaliyuga is HariSankirtana (chanting the name of the lord) and through Sankirtana a person can reach his ends and attain moksha. A person in Satyayuga attains mukti through dhyana, in Treta Yuga by yajnas and Dwarpur Yuga through puja and in Kali yuga through HariSankirtana. The above dhyana, Puja, Yajana, etc., are all combined or merged in the form of HariSankirtana in Kali Yuga to attain salvation. Sri Chaitanya or Lord Gouranga preached the value and importance of Sankirtana to liberate the mortal and attain moksha. In this manner, for Meitei Vaishnavites living in the society today, NataSankirtanaMahayajna was become an indispensable event in the lives of the people since time immemorial. In short, NataSankirtana is the only highest karma for the Meitei society. This paper attempts to discuss the NataSankirtana as a Mahayajna in Manipuri society.

Keywords: nata sankirtana, manipur, maha yajna, vaishnavism, shrimad bhagavat, hari sankirtana, ghandharbam, vaishnava sampradaya, mahamantra, sadhana, mahapurush, paramatama, pritolok, devalok, sangskar, tulsī, urik, lukun, devatas, abhinandan, sruti, smriti, mandap mapu, moibung khonga, arangpham, khonghampam, guru-sishyaparampara

NataSankirtana of Manipur is considered as MahaYajna (complete sacrifice) in Vaishnavism of Manipur. Its origin is traced to the aesthetics and philosophy of ShrimadBhagavat. In ShrimadBhagavat, the only merit in Kali yuga is HariSankirtana in which a person can reach his end and attain Moksha. From time immemorial, human beings believed in the existence of the God. So we have been worshipping him in one form or the other. We worship him with the help of drum or with song and dance and it is known as Ghandharbam. The different religions of Prachin Bharat i.e. Sheiba, Sakta, Boudha, Jainism etc, have devised ways to worship the Istadevata starting with Sankirtana. The religious sect of Sanatan searches different means to get the almighty. Whereas Satya Yuga, Dhyana was the only means to get blessing of God, Yajna for Treta, Puja for Dwapur, and HariSankirtana for Kali are believed to be sure paths to achieve blessing of the almighty. It is also believed that the end of Dhyana, Yajna, and Puja is equal to the observance of Hari Nam Sankirtana. It is said that those who were born in Satya, Treta, Dwapur are jealous of those who will be born in Kali Yuga. Even the creator Brahma wishes to take birth as human being in Kali. In the Kali Yuga, NataSankirtana is the only means like Dhyana, Yajna and Puja of Satya, Treta and Dwapur respectively had been to get God. Thus, chanting of the name of Shree Krishna is the only means in Kali Yuga. This chanting of the Mahamantra will enable the soul to cross the sansarmaya to Godhead. Here, we may remember the sloka-

Hare nam hare nam hare nameibakebalang|

Kalonastebonastebonastebogatreinatha.

Free translation- Harinam is the only way of salvation in kali Yuga and therefore it is believed that one can reach heaven with the help of NataSankirtana. All the Manipuri VaishnavaSampradaya believe and follow the advice of Shree ChaitanyaPrabhu. So, NataSankirtana becomes a very important part and parcel of

the rituals of birth, death and other occasions. It had been developed as a great Yajna is our society. In fact, Yajna means to worship Vishnu.

On performing Yajna one should be very neat and clean, and must compulsorily use should urik (carved from the stem of the sacred Indian basil). We must also use chandan, and not to be tainted with any occasion of birth or death in the recent past. As NataSankirtana is also a Mahayajna one should follow the above principles. Those who will participate in NataSankirtana will use Astabesh (eight ornaments). By Astabesh we mean Dwadashatilak, turbanurik, lukun, (sacred thread), cloth hung on the shoulder, dhoti, waist band and inner pant etc. Without these, it is not fit for Sankirtana.

In fact, the NataSankirtana is the religious sadhana that may be used by everybody without difficulty. Vishnupuran firmly declares that ten years of Yajna of Satya is equaled with one year in Treta, one year of Treta with one month of Dwapur, one month of Dwapur with one day of Kali in this respect. So, HariSankirtana is the only way to be followed by everybody in the epoch of Kali. The 12 Skandha, 5 Adhayaya 55 sloka of ShrimadBhagavat states that-

Kalingsabhajayantyarjagunanja: sarbhagina/
YatraSankirtaneneibasarbaswartboplabhyate/ /

Free translation- In the era of Kali, Dharma, Artha, Kam, Moksa or Mukti etc, should only be achieved by HarinamSankirtana. The Wiseman like mahapurush of the kali epoch takes HarinamSankirtana most importantly for his life. Now, we have to discuss what Yajna is, before discussing Sankirtana as MahaYajna. There are different types of yajna. The Veda, Grihasutra, and Dharmasutra clearly defined that we should follow different Yajnas to purify the accumulated in different generations.

Nata Sankirtana as a Mahayajna:

In the Sanskrit to English dictionary of Sir Moneir Moneir



Williams, Yajna means – ‘worship’ or ‘devotion’. some Abhidhans say TyagPurbakPujaribhangAradhanabhangYajnanag, which means ‘Yajnesbhor’ It is an act of sacrifice for the sake of Shree Hari and to satisfy Shree Hari. Thus, the Puja and Aradhana of Shree Haris known as Yajna. According to Amarkos, there are seven Yajnas - Yajna, Yag, Adhabar, Makb, Saba, Krutuand SaptaTantu. It is from time immemorable that some Yajnas had been performed under different names like BisvajitYajna as Adhabar, PitriYajna as Sab, RajsuyaYajna as Krutu. In the book NataSankirtana written by SanakhyaEbotombiHaorokcham- he says

Yajna means all the acts performed for the satisfaction of paramatama, prtilok, devalok and for those who have sangskar (Purification), for the beings, and for keeping the cycle of nature, for the goodness of all. Not only these, but it also denotes mantra performed by the believers of SanatanDhrama, drabya and sradba different sat karmas.

According to eminent scholar Ningthoujamkholo Singh - *Yajna is the presentation of something to the Devatas that had already, kept been prescribed for presentation from the past.*

From the above it may be seen that Yajna is the nature of bowing down to the Istadevatas along with respective mantras and items according to the Devatas. There are different types of Yajnas. They are Yajna for fire, Yajna for water, Yajna for Deva and Devi with Ghot, Yajna done at the top of hills by offering a victim to the God of winds, and Yajna for Nad Brahma etc. On the other hand, Yajna is the first foundation of religion. And the whole being of the universe is the outcome of the Yajna of Devalok. The 9th sukta of Rig Vedastatesthat-

Basantoashyasadajyangrishamab: Edham: SbaradaHabi: Saptasyasanaparidhyantri: saptasamidba: Krita: // Deva yadayajnamtanbanaababhannapurushampasum / Yajnenayajnamayajantadebastanidbarmaniprathamanyasan/ //

Free translation-*Human beings can become paramatama as a result of the Yajnas performed by the gods with the occurrence of Spring (fat), Summer (fire), Winter (offering) seasons. Above this, the seven days of a week become Meibhak or fire wood, SingkhaTaret and MeikhangAbum (morning, daytime and night time). Thus, theseyajnasdone by the Devatas become the first religious rituals which is ever going on. We should perform different kinds of yajnas to satisfy by the Dwija, Devaloks and Pritilokas so as to be able to follow the Devatas who are performing mahayajnas in every era for the welfare of human beings. One of the highest religion (Dharma) is to perform various Yajnas to sanctify Jivatama. And it is the only means to get Godhead is the main opinion of Sruti and Smriti.*

From the very beginning of Kali Yug the followers of Sanatan Dharma had been performing SankirtanaMahayajana by worshipping Shree Hari. And it is mentioned in the 11skandha, 5 Adhyaya 32 sloka of BhagavanVyas Deva’s ShrimadBhagavatMahapurana –

Krishnabarnangtvisaaakrishnangsangopangastraparshadang/ Yajnyagei :Sankirtanaprayeirayajyastibi sumedbasa://

Free translation-*The wise men worship Him who has dark colour and accompanied with instrument and various dresses, with SankirtanaMahayajna. The features of NataSankirtana and its natures and rules are vividly discussed in the Puja Adhyaya, AdivasaAdhyaya ,ParvarangaAdhyaya, NrityaAdhyaya, TaalaAdhyaya and DhrwaAdhyaya of Bharat NataShastra as–*

Brahmotangsaptarupanghisamvetadbinisbritam Debataradhanangpunyamanantanggibataditam.

Free translation- *By keeping the seven forms given by Brahma, the worshipping ceremony is celebrated for the holy Devatas along with drum and music. The seven forms made by different taalas are celebrated in order to worship the Istadevatas. And it then comes to the seven parts of SankirtanaMahayajna. Thus, there seven roopas of NataSankirtana are - Raga houba, Raga taba, Rajmel, Tanchap, Menkup, SwadhinandBijoy. A SankirtanaMahaYajna is celebrated following this order. The seven roopas of .SankirtanaMahayajna according to Bharat’s NatyaShastra which has been purportedly given by Brahma means that all the vidhividhan and vyavastha are developed from veda mantras. The Nata-SankirtanaMahayajna was for the first time presented by DevarishiNarda with the help of instruments like drum, music and dance on the assembly of Deva, Danav etc. and it can be found on the 31 sloka of 5Adhayaya of Bharat’s NatyaShastra as -*

Chitradaksbinabritoutusaptaroopeprabartite/ Sopobanesanirgitedebastatyavinandite// Naradadeiyasbchagandharvei: savayangdevadanaba:/ Nirgitangsrabita: samyagalayataksamavitam//

Free translation-*The SaptaRoopa is developed by the chitra, vartika and daksbina on the assembly of Narda and Gandharba while, raga houba is celebrated with standing stuti. Along with this taalsAbhinandan, laya etc. are done together. Thus SankirtanaMahayajna can be celebrated in a very small form. On the other hand, it can also be celebrated as big as one can.*

In a Sankirtana, the two drummers will be the two hotris standing their facing eastward under the hall. Secondly, the group of esheibanba will stand facing northward to (upohon) worship and to start singing like abhinandan etc. Then, the duhar and bayan group will stand on the north side facing southward to repeat mean to translate those sung by the eisheibanba.

Thus all the palas will be ritwijars to encircleyajnabedi for the saptarupadhruva to present in serial. And it is silently observed by Mandapmapu (in the form of Bhahma) sitting on the southern side of the hall so as not to let happen any unwanted disturbances. Again, there is one Moibungkhongha who will be seated on the western side of the mandal. He will blow the conch at different occasions of theSankirtana to bring prosperity. From this we know that there is no difference between the Fireyajna (AganihotriYajna) and SankirtanaMahayajna because the underlying significance is the same. In order to describe the intricacies of Sankirtana as a Mahayajna, a detailed discussion of Sankirtana is given as follows.

A Mandap is required for such a Sankirtana. There will be a Jatra or the main post of the Mandap. Without a Jatra, there will be no Sankirtana. So, we should make the mandap on a sacred and auspicious day. We all believe that among the nine posts of a mandap eight will be the witnessess and the ninth post in the middle represents the God Gadadbar while the post very near to the house, the right side post is LalitaSundari, BishakhaSundari, ChitraSundari, ChampakalataSundari, TungabidyaSundari, IndurekhaSundari, RangadeviSundari, SudeviSundari etc. respectively. The worshipping place at the centre of the Mandap is for Shree Gourahari. So it generally is known that a mandap is the sthan or sanctum of Shree Krishna. Above all this, the four corners of the mandap also have their own gods. And there

should be a *Puja* on the *Chingkei* or east for Vasudeva, in the *Meiram* for Anirudhadevata, in *MoirangLaiji* for PradhernaDevata, in the *Koubru* for Sankersen. It is also believed that Kuber and Laxmi are the Bhandhari have seats on the western side of the *mandap*. It is a place where that Shree Radhika wants to meet Shree Krishna. At that time Shree Radhika chants her mantras like- *HariHariHaribol*. If these are known a person is known as *mandapmashakkhangba* who knows the *mandap*. So, a Sankirtanacan not be held at any place at any time. On the other hand, when a Sankirtana is to be held, Arangpham is necessary. They represent Shree BorHaridash, Shree Ramananda, Shree Rup Damudor, Shree Jagannathpandit, Shree ShivanandaSen, Kalidash, Shree RaghopPandit for service of Thaomei (light), Lei Chandon, Pana, Dhup, Babok, Khonghampham, Vandhari etc. respectively. SankirtanaMurti is from the anga of Gouranga representing Shree Nivarsh from *maanesheihanba* is being while Abdeita from *budhi* and beat drums and Govinda follows them Murali from *endri* become pala and form *prana* (mind) Mukundo become *dubar*. On the other hand, Nityainanda of *chita* come as *bobhokmakok*. Therefore, a Sankirtana is really the form and figure of Gourchandra. The Manipuri Gouriya Vishnu Sampradhyyasuppose that it is just like to see Gourachandra while seeing *Sankirtana*. That is why they worship while seeing *Sankirtana*. Abdeita had awakened Gouchandra at the *rasa* of *Nabadwip* with *hungkar*. So, the first *Raag* of *pung* is Abdeita in a *Sankirtana*.

Another important item of a *Sankirtana* is the *MoibungKhongba*. It is for the prosperity of the *Sankirtana*. On the other hand, we believe that it protects the evil spirits on a Shradha (sorat) and Samvatsor (Phiroi) Yajnas. ThokchomGopal Singhwriter '*SankirtanaBihar*'-

That the appropriate name Moibung (Conch) is Utgrashrabaand his father name is Rombarshran.

As far as *Sambasa*, e, arranger is concerned it is also one of the most important parts in a *Sankirtana*. If he is not fit for the post of *Sambasa*, there is *apradha*. There is a saying that *Krishnaapradha* can be pardon but the *apradha* or ritualistic offence of *vaishnava* that can never be pardoned. On the book *NataSankirtanaNeinaba* by LeimapokpamLakpati Singh, it is written -

If the Sambasa does not observe his duties properly it amounts to vaishnav offence. Of all the offences vaishnav offence is the most serious one. It rather paver the way to bell fir the household who is offering the Sankirtana. There is no expiation for vaishnava offence. Theoretically Sambasa is performed by Sudevi and Kasturi. The Nabadwipbhava is Shivananda or sometimes said to be Brahma. The Sambasa must arrange seats for princes, princesses and brahmanvaishnavas. Without a Sambasa everything will be chaotic.

From the above, we know that there should be appropriate seats for princes, princesses, the royal ladies Brahman, Vaishnava etc. and it should be the duty of *Sambasa*. So without him it is a little difficult to start *Sankirtana*. So, *Sambasa* is also one of the important parts in *NataSankirtana*. In a *Sankirtana*, there is one *Khonghampham* literally washing place. It is very important one in the *Sankirtana*. It is a place where every Vaishnava, Brahmin and everybody will wash their heart and soul before entering the *yajasthan* or the *sanctum*.

There is a pit in the washing place where a piece of banana plant is kept. Here, the departed soul will live for the day to attend the Sankirtana. Shree Hari's name and his *lelais* also very important in a *kirtan*. Mahadeva is the devata who is on the place of *kbonghampham*. There are various rules and regulations controlling the entrances to the *mandap* at different stages of the *Sankirtana*. These rules are the traditional rules which are strictly followed even today. It is also mentioned in the book of *NataSankirtanaNeinabaAbumsubasaruk*, published by GulapiNataSankirtanaAcademy that-

At the time of the beginning of Raag no one is allowed to seat holding a flower or even a floweret in their hands. And none is allowed to enter or exit out of the singing circle. If it is not the appropriate time nothing can be done till the end of the Raag.

Once more another important part of the *Sankirtana* is the *Mandapmapu*. Here also, Guru Gulapi's *NataSankirtanaAcademy's NataSankirtanaNeinabaAbumsubaSaruk* describes the need of *Mandapmanpu* -

He will be followed by the yumbu or host who will also bow to the palas in the order of the drummers Isheishakpa, Duhar, Khonpangba and palas. After that others may enter.

From the above we know that there are different stages during which one allowed to enter and not to enter inside the singers circle from the beginning of *Raag* and the end of *Raag*. There rules have to be observed by the *bhaktavaishnavas*.

While performing *NataSankirtana* singer and drummer should compulsory done himself with *Urik-lukun*. It is also mentioned in the '*Meitei NataSankirtanaNeinabaAbumsubaSaruk*' states that-

A person who has not been initiated into the lukun wearing ritual is circumscribed from performing the Rajmelabbhinaya. By that very token we may ask the propriety of a female singer, who is not generally initiated into this ritual, performing the Rajmelabbhinaya.

From this we know that all the singer and drummer must use *lukun* while participating a *Sankirtana*. And on the other hand it denotes that woman without *lukun* should not represent as singer in a *NataSankirtana* but in the *kirtan* they may. In fact, *NataSankirtana* is meant for women also but there is *Nupi Pala* in the form of worship. *Raseshori Pala* which is introduced by BhagyachandraMaharaj for his daughter *Bimbabati* is in the form of *kirtan*.

According to *ShrimadBhagavatPuran*, there are nine *Bhakties*. They are *Shriban, Kirtan, Smaran, PadaSebanam, Archan, Bandana, Dasya, Sakhyam and Atmanibedan*. All the above *Bhakties* is in a *Sankirtana*. That is why a *NataSankirtana* is a *Yajna*.

We may conclude by saying that the features of *Yajna* included in *NataSankirtana* are the internal parts of *Sankirtana*. For example *Raagabouba, Raagataba, Raagamel, Raagatanchap, RaagasswadbinandRaagaBijoyis* compulsorily to be performed in the *MahaYajna*. To perform *NataSankirtana* a *Mandap* is also essential.

Adivash which is performed one day before *Sankirtana* is such a form of *Yajna* of inviting *Deva* and *Devis* (gods and goddesses) and offering them their proper places in the '*YajnaMandap*'. This *Yajna* is closely related to *NataSankirtana*.

Indian sages (*Muni*) compared *Adivash* with *Yajna* and expressed that it is similar to the actual performance of the *Yajna*. To perform *puja* prior to *Sankirtana* is much similar



to perform *Yajna* itself. Therefore, before doing '*Ranga Puja*' of *Mandap* (i.e. to perform puja at the centre of the *Mandap*) *Pung*, *Eshei* and *Yajnas* not performed. *Ranga puja* is essential for *MahaYajna*. To perform *Sankirtana* for *Shradha Karma*, *Khongbampbam* is essential. All the Muni-Rishi and Brahman-Vaishnavas who come to attend the *Yajna* should be served at the *Khongbampbam* by cleaning their feet. It is believed that by doing so one could attain blessing from them. This part cannot be skipped, it is regarded as a very essential part. The 12 Skandha, 8 Adhyaya and 38 sloka of *ShrimadBhagavat* states that-

After offering seats to Nara Narayan their feet will be washed and offering arja, chandan, dhup, di, flowers, puja will be offered to them.

This form is still in practice and can be seen in *Shradha karma* that *Khongbampbam* is kept at the entrance but a little farther from the actual entrance of the singers' circle. Before *Sankirtana* begins, a ritual practice called '*Boriba*' is performed. It is also an essential part of *Yajna*. The 72 sloka of *Saptamadyaya* of *Manu Sanghita* says -

In order to perform the task according to the way of Atharva Veda a purohit of every Clan as well as a Ristik (a male brahman) is selected by the king to perform Yajna.

Before the beginning of *Sankirtana*, the host who arranges the *Sankirtana* needs to invite the *Arangpam* (this term refers to a male attendant who serves and arranges for the occasion). Besides, he should also invite everyone who takes part in performing *Sankirtana*, for example, the *pungyeiba* (who plays the *Mridang*), the *esheishakpa* (who sings the song of *Sankirtana*), the *duhar*, the *Khonpangba*, *Pala* etc.

Invitation is given while all the preparation are completed to begin *Sankirtana* and it is done by offering *lei-chandan*, *heiruk-pana* and clothes. Without this no *Sankirtana* can start. In fact, *Sankirtana* is ritual form of offering to God. So, it is believed that service to god means service to those who perform the *Sankirtana* and all the attendants who might be sages and devotees. On this account, the host is supposed offer them presents as best as he could.

This tradition is taken seriously by *Manu Sanghita* and expresses thus-

If the host is in a position of inability to offer proper dakshina it is better for him to indulge in other activities with total faith at heart and control of the senses, such activities which may bring punya. It is better not to perform any Yajna if the host is going to be able to offer proper dakshina.

It means when any one would be unable to offer proper presents, he/she should not think to perform *Sankirtana*. Instead, they should find other ways to attain godhead. Therefore many *Karmadata* do not fear to sacrifice anything to offer to them. All those who would take part in performing *Yajna* have to wear sacred clothes, *dwadarshatilak*, *uric*, *lukum*, *trikatchaphejom* and *kokyet* (turban). This form of *Yajna* is done in *Sankirtana*. The part of *MoibungKhongba* is also essential as it would pave the way to have the grace of god. Importance of *Moibung* (conch shell) is clearly shown in *ShrimadBhagavat*, *Vishnu puja*, *Atharva Veda* says-

A conch shell is a blend of space, the planetary system and gold. Its sound frightens enemies, controls demons and evil spirits, chases away ignorance, laziness and disease and promotes long life.

That's why, *Moibung* occupies a significant place in

performing *Sankirtana* and it is compulsory to perform it at the beginning, while playing high form of *punglon* in the midst of *Rajmel* and at the end of *Sankirtana* i.e. at the time of taking *Bijoy*. The positions of all the singers and *pung* players are arranged in a fixed pattern for *Yajna*, and it is followed in performing *Sankirtana*. The two *pung* players who are *Yajnabota* would sit facing towards the east direction, the *esheibanba* who is the *tantadbar* would sit facing towards the north direction and *Utgatatantadhar* would sit facing towards the south, the *duhar* would also sit facing the south and in this way all the *Ritiks* sit to perform *Yajna* would sit in a semi-circular form in the *Sankirtana* circle.

The *MandapMapu* would take responsibility of taking care of the *Sankirtana*. He takes the same responsibility as the *Brahma* does in *Yajna*.

Because of the similarity between *Yajna* and *Nata-Sankirtana*, there is no doubt that *Nata-Sankirtana* is a great *Yajna*. Besides, the 32 sloka 5 adhyaya of *Akadashskandha* of *ShrimadBhagavat* introduces *NataSankirtana* as *Yajna*. Undoubtedly, *Manu Sanghita* says that *Brahma Yajna* is *MahaYajna*. So there is no doubt in saying that *Sankirtana* which is taken as a form of *Brahma Yajnas* *MahaYajna*.

In support of this, here is the statement given in *Shree ShreeCheitanyaCharitaMrita* which state that -

Of all the Yajnas Krishna namYajna is the most important hundred thousand Ashwamedha are equal to one KrishnamYajna.

Conclusion

Thus, viewing from different angles, when a *NataSankirtana* is performed based on the particular *taala* with strict rules and regulations, no doubt it becomes a *MahaYajna*. Because of the above reason, in *Manipur VaishnavaSampradhyaya*, *NataSankirtana* is taken as a vital part in every occasion that takes place in human life from birth to death and it cannot be kept apart from any occasions. Lastly, it is notable that *Sankirtana* which is an art form transmitted from generation to generation through traditional school of *guru-sishyaparampara* is now institutionalized, along with the traditional school. And it becomes the fourth Indian art form recognized by the *UNESCO* as an Intangible Cultural Heritage. So it is hopeful that this ritualistic art form, associated with the cultural life of the *Manipuris* from birth to death will thrive to live on as part of Indian cultural Heritage despite the onslaught of mass consumerist culture.

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