

MANIPURI DANCE: A JOURNEY

R.K. Singhajit Singh

This presentation is one of loud thinking by a practicing Manipuri dancer, choreographer and teacher, depending on his experience of teaching and performing extensively both nationally and internationally and exposed to various art forms and cultures. Merely cataloguing Manipur's historical contacts with the mainland in terms of dance performances by Manipuri artistes and teaching by Manipuri gurus at various places in India will not fully answer the fundamental question of level and degree of understanding of the aesthetic psyche. The study will naturally have to be both academic as well as artistic, beyond what meets the eye.

Before any analytical discussion on the spread of Manipuri dance beyond its habitat, one should get an idea about the art and its background. This is important because the dance and its practice as well as its cultural soil are so completely different from the other Indian dances. Since it is inextricably woven into the social and religious fabric of the people, an isolated study of the art without understanding its matrix can even be misleading. This will also help in understanding the advantages and disadvantages in propagating an exclusive art beyond its original home.

Since time immemorable every kind or religious ritual in Manipur had dance and music as important ingredients. Local legends depict dance and music as important elements of creation of the universe. The festival of Lai Haraoba with elaborate rituals and dances performed every year is one of the oldest religious theatres of the world still extant.

The inflow of Hindu influence gave birth to two of the richest classical art traditions - the Ras Leela and Sankirtan with their many offshoots. This was a gradual process of assimilation, rejection and evolution spanning three centuries resulting in what

we know as classical Manipuri dance matured in the vortex of a distinct civilization.

Cultural diffusion

It is generally known that migration, invasion, religious missionaries, and travelling outside are common factors of culture borrowing and diffusion. Historically Manipuri had been exposed to almost all these factors from time to time. While some did affect the culture of the land others just did not leave any significant mark.

The very early migrations from the East and West brought a great number of people who became permanent settlers of the valley. They brought their own cultures and skills which were seamlessly integrated to the original culture of the natives becoming what is known as the homogenous Manipuri culture. Although the people were initially divided into seven clans all of them got completely integrated.

From the 15th century Brahmans from mainland India started migrating to Manipur. They became completely integrated into the native society by adopting indigenized family names. Brahmans however try to marry only within their community to maintain their identity.

The most significant cultural and religious landmark was the coming of Hinduism from the 15th century with the worship of Vishnu.

Adaptation and assimilation

The interesting fact remains that the people of the land did not adopt the religion or its practice as well as the elements related to performing arts without necessary modifications to suit the prevailing customs and traditions. My friend Prof. Lokendra rightly called it "Manipurization of Hinduism."



As our kings were committed patrons of the art and scholarship, they sent talented artistes and scholars outside to learn and bring back new knowledge and skills to enrich the arts of the land. The result of this voyage spanning more than four centuries is the astounding richness of Manipuri dance and music. In the area of Tala, Nata Sankirtana list around seventy varieties; most of them are in active use. Kokila Priya Tala and Gajendra Guru are some of the examples. Most of these Talas mentioned in the Shastras were imported, but were never employed in the raw. They underwent necessary changes and adaptations to be in tune with the aesthetic sensibilities of the land and took on a native character. There are also many indigenous Tala Prabandhas of local origin, always composed with a set of inviolable matching melodic counterpart of singing, stylised playing of the cymbals and at times even the accompanying Cholom (dance). Imported ingredients both in theory and practice remain only a name and matter of academic analysis. The process amounted to a complete indigenisation of the imported elements. Comparable phenomena can be found in some South East Asian countries like the Indonesian Ramayana.

Terminologies

Terms like Raga, Tala, Rasa and Mel mean and also do not mean the same thing as in understood in the mainland and with good reason. Based on the native talent and aesthetic sensibilities an extraordinarily rich and sophisticated tradition of performing arts evolved through generations enjoying unquestioned acceptance of the society attaining the status of religious sanctity. A distinct example is that even Pung (drum) has Ragas.

Manipuri dance comprises of different art forms.

In fact the word dance seems inadequate to convey correctly the wide variety of Manipuri performing arts using the body as the medium. Jagoi, Cholom and Thang-Ta can be best expressed by their original names.

Unlike the other dance forms which comprise of one kind of dance, Manipuri comprises of two kinds:-

Jagoi found in Ras Leela and Goshtha Leela. The other is Cholom found in Sankirtan traditions. In Jagoi a dancer does not play an instrument whereas in Cholom the dancer either uses an instrument or claps with his hands. Pung Cholom (drum dance) and Kartal Cholom (cymbal dance) are well known examples. Khubak Cholom (clapping dance) is performed exclusively during Ratha Jatra festival. The style and training of both Pung Cholom and Kartal Cholom are completely different and the artistes specialise only in one of them.

The ancient Lai Haraoba festival uses both masculine and feminine Jagoi usually performed by common worshippers as offerings to the deity. The performance of the Maibis (priestesses) in this festival are more complicated and well structured. There is also a wide range of ritualistic and narrative dances in this festival.

The martial art of Thang-Ta also has distinctive ornate movements and of late these have been successfully incorporated in many dance compositions and choreographic works.

The commencement

The first break to propagate Manipuri dance outside Manipur came when Gurudev Rabindranath Thakur invited R.K. Budhimanta from Tripura in 1920 to teach the art at Shantiniketan. Later on Guru Atomba Singh from Manipur was followed by a string of Manipuri teachers who taught there and the practice is still continuing. This incidentally was the first ever institutionalized training centre of Manipuri dance and is also longest lasting anywhere. We remember Gurudev Rabindranath with gratitude, whose vision gave Manipuri dance the first ever platform to flower outside its domain.

Around the same period the first opportunity to perform Manipuri Ras Leela outside came when Guru Amubi Singh was sent to Calcutta by Maharaj Churhand to present Ras Leela when the Prince of Wales visited India in 1921. It is on record that the Guru was reluctant to edit the whole-night

performance to 15 minutes, which he considered would be sacrilegious. We hear that it needed a great deal of persuasion and pressure to compel the Guru to compromise.

Guru Amubi went to Uday Shankar Indian Cultural Centre at Almora in 1939 to teach Manipuri Dance. A solo number "Neela Kamala Dala Shyam" taught by the Guru at this centre was widely appreciated both by the public and press. But it still took quite some time for the Manipuris to get used to the idea of presenting the temple arts on the stage.

This was also the time of Indian cultural renaissance when prominent art lovers started discovering the classical art traditions of the country. When people in the rest of the country came to know about a beautiful dance form called Manipuri they started looking for teachers, and our Gurus started going out to propagate the art. Guru Amubi and Guru Tomba were pioneers in this field and travelled to places like Ahmedabad, Delhi, Calcutta and Shillong to teach. Guru Amudon also taught at Bombay for some time. Dancers like Priyagopal Sana, Tarun Kumar and Mahabir became well known figures in the Indian dance scene. Priyagopal Sana taught at various institutions at Calcutta and Bombay and also had a short connection with the Bombay film industry as a choreographer. Tarun Kumar ran an institution named Tarun Kumar Dance Academy at Lahore before India's partition in 1947.

Manipuri's spread

In the late 1930s and 1940s Manipuri dance had a wide following in the major cities of India. Most dance institutions in the metropolises had Manipuri dance classes and students flock to these classes.

The whole entertainment world's aesthetic preference gradually shifted towards faster, louder and stronger statement as opposed to slow moving understatement which is the basic character of Manipuri.

Of all the other cultural institutions outside Manipur Shantiniketan has maintained a steadfast

home for Manipuri dance since the days of Rabindranath Tagore. This could be because of the leisurely and gentle flow of Tagore's poetry and music which mingles comfortably with the basic character of the dance. In most Vishwabharati productions one can usually find traces of Manipuri dance either directly or indirectly. The objective of these productions was primarily to give visual interpretation to the poetry of Tagore and not promotion of any particular art and Manipuri was a very natural choice. Interestingly enough Tagore chose two extremes of Indian classical dances, one from Manipur the Easternmost corner and another from Kerala the extreme south. The first one is known for understatement, and the latter for overstatement.

The media - its service and disservice to Manipuri.

"The media's the most powerful entity on earth. They have the power to make the innocent guilty and to make the guilty innocent, and that's power. Because they control the power. Because they control the minds of the masses". Malcolm X. African American activist.

At a time when an art form like Manipuri dance, from the remotest corner of the country and distinctively rich culture deserved and needed proper understanding and support, we were unlucky to face some unfriendly elements in the media which did a great deal of injustice and harm to Manipuri dance.

When I came to Delhi in 1945 as a young man I was horrified to find that Mr. Charles Fabri, the most influential and respected art critic of the time writing for the most influential paper. The Statesman was obsessively committed to belittle Manipuri dance.

For this art scholar settled in India, his aesthetic sensibilities did not extend beyond what he considered should be Indian art and his Manipuri baiting went on relentlessly. The myth of Manipuri being a mere folk dance was almost entirely his creation. I saw this damaging misinformation spreading like a virus as people believed the printed words appearing in a respected paper. This sense of hostility, alienation and hurt had negative effects back home, which I would

like to underplay for obvious reasons. Although seething with anger, I was too young and inexperienced to do anything about it and whatever I did only harmed my professional interest as a performer. Incidentally that was the time Manipuri style was popular among the students and my class was always full.

After Charles Fabri, The Statesman had another highly respected dance critic Mr. Subbudu, well known for his scholarship of music and dance. Because of his unrestrained acid pen he had equal number of admirers and enemies.

Unfortunately for Manipuri Dance we were on the wrong side of Subbudu's pen and had to live with it for the larger part of his long career. Miraculously there was complete change and U turn in his attitude towards Manipuri around 1991. After hearing one of my lectures at the India International Centre he congratulated me and said "I never meet an artiste back stage this is the first time I am doing it, I liked your presentation." and also wrote a very favourable review of my speech. From then on Manipuri dance was favourably included in his good book. So much so that every time he met us he blessed us, and we remember him with respect and affection. We only wish this period was longer.

Luckily we had no such problem with other critics. Better informed critics with a wider aesthetic outlook came to the scene and Manipuri got its rightful place in the media. But this era of fresh air in the print media had a limited life. Driven by market economy the space of dignified and quality art criticism was taken over by pop culture, sports and celebrity gossip. The Hindu seems to be one of the few papers continuing to cover the classical arts regularly. The same is true of the electronic media, movements carried out by scantily clad women catering to the lowest common denomination of public taste. This is a problem confronting all the classical arts of the country with unpredictable consequences.

On the positive side knowledgeable critics, art scholars and respectable people whose opinions matter are appreciative of Manipuri arts much more than

before and are also encouraging and promoting deserving artistes. But it will take a long time to undo the damaging impression created earlier for more than half a century.

Continuous evolution

The migration from temple to stage brought about necessary adaptations leading to many creative works both in group choreography and also works in Manipuri dance. Many talented Gurus and artistes have been working in this area with commendable results.

Objectives and aesthetic appeal of both these Prekshagrihas (playhouses) are different and so are the arts even as the basic technique remains the same. All said and done the dignity and sanctity one feels at the Mandapa can never be replicated on the stage. On the other hand the proscenium stage provides various other facilities creating excellent effects of another kind.

Contribution of Manipuri dance to Indian Culture.

Considering the size of the state, Manipuri dance has positively made a significant contribution to Indian culture. In any consideration of Indian classical dances Manipuri is certainly one of the major components. No Indian cultural festival within the country or outside is ever complete without Manipuri dance. In the modern wave of presenting multi-style classical dance choreographic works Manipuri is invariably one of the unavoidable organic component of the basic Indian cultural framework. So much so that an Indian dance festival will be incomplete without Manipuri.

Yes it is true that the style does not find a wide following of students and connoisseur compared to some other style but it is certainly not any indication of lack of excellence or quality. The standing of any art cannot be quantified in terms of number of adherents. The study of public taste at any given time and place has always remained elusive. What the same people like today will not remain tomorrow. What we

are concerned about is quality art with good taste. Manipuri positively enjoys a respectable place in the minds of the elite and culturally knowledgeable Indian public.

Living in a sensation and excitement hungry world, Jagoi, the graceful lyrical and slow feminine aspect of Manipuri is slow in its spread, while Pung Cholom and Thang-Ta, the vigorous aspects of Manipuri arts are heading the top seller list in the entertainment market and the demand is increasing. At any given moment there are at least ten troupes of these arts travelling somewhere abroad entertaining appreciative audiences.

Lack of easy adaptability is one of the reasons why Manipuri is not usually taken up by outsiders. Once you are a Manipuri dancer, your body get conditioned to the specific requirements of the art and repel alien movements incompatible to the art. Conversely it is also true that those trained in other style can never absorb Manipuri dance movements and whatever they learn will look corrupted and will remain un-Manipuri. On top of that is the present world of excitement and sensationalism. Manipuri naturally will be chosen only by those who find pleasure and satisfaction in its dignified slowness sans sensationalism.

Cultural diversity

Parallel to bio-diversity, cultural diversity is a measure of the health of human civilization. Cultural ecology, reflecting relative interdependence and self-reflective dynamics of cultural processes are now drawing attention of many nations. In this regard Manipuri dance is an important ingredient in the cultural diversity of India. It is contributing not only to its richness but also in stabilising the subtle cultural ecology of the country.

In the keynote speech at UNESCO conference 2003 Johan Galtung (Norwegian sociologist) said understanding a culture, even one's own, is not to be taken for granted. He differentiates between **Surface culture** - spoken and written language, symbolic aspects such as religion, art and law, and **deep culture** a shared sub consciousness understood with the **gut brain** rather than the **head brain**.

It is most heartening to note that UNESCO has very recently inscribed **Manipuri Sankirtana** as one of the important intangible cultural heritage of the world.

Manipuri dance has made significant contribution of Indian Culture both at the gross and subtle levels in a continuing dialogue of deep culture and shared sub consciousness.