

MANIPURI DANCES : EXTENDING THE BOUNDARIES

Dr. Sunil Kothari

Geographically bounded on one side by the Indo-Burma border and on other by the Assam Hills, Manipur has for centuries preserved and nurtured its own distinct dance and music traditions. There is no occasion during which dance and music are not a part of life in Manipur. Right from the birth of a child, the piercing of the ears, the sacred thread ceremony, marriage, death, after-death ceremonies all the major stages of life are celebrated with dance and music. Nowhere else in India are dance and music so closely interwoven with rituals and religious practice. One rarely comes across any Manipuri (Meitei) who does not know dance and music.

In Manipur, before the advent of Vaishnavism, the Manipuri people had their own indigenous religious belief system. Even after the spread of Vishnavism from Bengal the earlier religious beliefs and practices still prevail and are a part of their life. Raja Bhagyachandra who ruled from 1975 to 1978 was a grandson of Garib Niwaz, who had accepted the Ramanadi faith of Vaishnavism. Bhagyachandra accepted the Gaudiya Vaishnava faith of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu. He had a dream and a vision in which Rasa dance forms were metamorphosed into the highly aesthetic Rasalilas. The kirtanas of Bengal and other musical traditions also were introduced.

Manipur offers a staggering variety of dance forms: the Pre-Vaishnavite dance forms such as Lai Haraoba, the dance of Maibas and Maibis, the priests and the priestesses: the Pung Cholom (playing on the cylindrical drums while dancing): Kartala Cholom (playing cymbals and dancing, clap dance): Natasankirtan, in which men perform Kartala Cholom, Pung Cholom, and sing and dance, before the presentation of Rasalilas: Nupi Khubak Ishei, in which women sing in a very high pitch, indulge in repartee and dance, and so on. Besides this there is a vibrant tradition of Thang-Ta, the martial art of Manipur,

wielding sword and spear, practised by both men and women.

When Rabindranath Tagore saw Manipuri dance for the first time at Bangladesh, he arranged for its teaching by inviting traditional gurus to Viswabharati, the University he had established at Santiniketan. The technique of Manipuri was also employed for the dance-dramas he wrote and for which he also wrote the music. This was the beginning of traditional Manipur dances finding another arena than mere traditional performances in Manipur. When Nabakumar Singh went to Ahmedabad and Guru Bipin Singh to Mumbai, Manipuri found another venue in the metropolitan cities. Guru Amubi Singh was invited by no less a choreographer and brilliant dancer than Uday Shankar to his Almora Dance Centre. Guru Amubi Singh's association with Uday Shankar brought happy results with the choreography of the film *Kalpana*, dovetailing Manipuri dances with contemporary sensibilities. Whereas Guru Bipin Singh with his disciples the four Jhaveri Sisters embarked upon experimentations within the tradition-expanding the classical language, creating solos, duets, group dances, with complex talas and correlating the *Natyasastra*, Bengali *kavya*, and *Shastra* texts to the classical Manipuri dances; artists like Rajkumar Singhjit Singh who moved to Delhi, invested the tradition with metropolitan sensibilities and created ballets of lasting using diverse Manipuri forms at Triveni Kala Sangam in that city.

Beginning with the first full-length Manipuri ballet '*Babruvahana*', using different aspects of the dance form, including Jagoi, Cholom and Thang-Ta, Singhjit Singh continued to produce one after another each year, totalling more than 35, with themes from Manipuri legends like '*Hayloe*', '*Ingen Lei*', '*Leima*' '*Khamba Thoibi*', as well as the stories from the Indian epics including '*Shakuntala*', '*Savitri*', '*Sita*' and '*Kumarasambhava*'.

He also choreographed ballets using abstract themes like 'Maya', 'Kalachakra', 'Chhaya Purush', and 'Survarna Dweep'. After leaving Triveni Kala Sangam both Singhjit Singh and his wife Charu Sija (nee Mathur), have continued choreographing works, which reflect contemporary sensibilities as seen in their production 'Nupi Ian' by Charu Sija and 'Search' by Singhjit Singh. From the sets, the costumes, the lighting, the dance, to the music, their choreographic works have consistently shown high aesthetic standards in all departments.

In Manipur the dancers and the choreographers Rajkumar Priyagopsana and Thiyam Tarunkumar Singh, were busy bringing in the advantages of their experiences and exposure on account of their travels abroad and within India in terms of presentation and choreography. Priyagopsana visited Mumbai and also travelled extensively abroad with Louise Lightfoot, the Australian dancer and choreographer. Tarunkumar with his wife Bilasini Devi had performed and travelled in different parts of the country under the banner of Haren Ghosh Impresario.

After independence when Jawaharlal Nehru Manipur Dance (JNMDA) was established in 1957 at Imphal, regular training in various aspects of Manipuri dance traditions was systematized. Since 1975 it also has a Production Unit. It has to date produced more than 40 dance-dramas, with five outstanding works, choreographed by Priyagopsana: 'Kabui Kei Oiba', 'Mangsat' Rajashri Bhagyachandra', 'Nongpok Panthoibi' and 'Chaitanya Mahaprabhu': 'Ramayana', 'Loktak Ishei' and 'Bashak Leela' and a majority of the recent works by Th. Chaotombi Singh and a few by W. Lokendrajit Singh. However, in terms of thematic content these dance-dramas abound in mythological stories, local legends, and folk tales. They hardly address contemporary issues.

A major breakthrough came with young Th. Chaotombi choreographing 'Kaibul Lamjao' in 1984-85. It dealt with the floating sanctuary around Loktak Lake, the home of the sangai, brow-antlered deer, which is currently in serious danger of extinction.

Written by Maharajkumari Binodini Devi, the renowned woman writer of Manipur, it expresses this anxiety and vision of the elegant dancing sangais. It is an attempt to represent the appeal for protecting wild life. A contemporary issue related to preservation of wild life in its treatment through fable, innovative technique, dancing, costumes, humans playing the roles of dancing deer, and music with imaginative choreography, it is a benchmark in the dance-dramas so far produced. When it was presented at the Nritya-Natika Festival of the Sangeet Natak Akademi in Delhi, it was received warmly praise for furthering the boundaries of Manipuri dance.

Another dance-drama 'Ballad of Loktak' written by Binodini Devi and choreographed by Babu Singh, also finds felicitous expression of concern for the environment. It incorporates the poem 'On Loktak Edge' by Khwairakpam Chaoba and the tongue-in-cheek poem about the much developed Loktak Lake in the poem 'Loktak Project' by contemporary poet Laishram Somarendra. Both dance-dramas 'Kabul Lamjao'; and 'Ballad of Loktak' stand out for their thematic content and commensurate Manipuri technique. Doubtless these productions have extended the boundaries of Manipuri dance in seeking new directions.

In recent years Priti Patel, former disciple of Guru Bipin Singh has made her presence felt on the national and international dance scene with her choreographic works dealing with themes which are different from mythology and legends. She has also explored the martial arts of Manipur taking assistance from a group of male dancers and drummers, the Pung players, using also the drum traditions.

Exploring the tradition of Rasalia, Natasankirtan, Thang-Ta, and Lai Haraoba, Priti has in her choreographic works like 'Malem' (prithvi-Earth) interpreted the content by suggesting that though the Earth is our mother who gives us everything, we use her as a commodity and there is no end to man's greed. In another work 'Suryagati' Priti explores the movement of the sun from morning to evening, which

has special significance in Manipuri tradition. With ritualistic Thang-Ta and Rasalia techniques in different contexts, not in the usual context of Rasalila. Such departures offer new insights and extend the frontiers of the technique. A contemporary poem by Somarendra Singh 'Olive Green' deals with the present plight of Manipur, the constant presence of soldiers in olive green uniform, the contrast to the glory of the rising sun and the blooming of beautiful orchids, depicting the troubled times.

The same agony is seen in 'Khuman', Black Sun. the land of seven clans and man's paradise has been torn asunder with struggle and strife for years. Young boys have been dying for a cause, simply to be heard and to be understood. Rasalilas and Natasankirtan transport the dancer from the reality of killing and bloodshed, bomb blasts and gun shots, to the world of Krishna who fights demons and mesmerizes gopis in the night-long dance-damas. But one has to wake up from this fantasy to face the reality of the bombs and the guns as gifts of the present century. These dance forms, an integral part of the lives of Manipur's people, who are going through the same crisis. The commentary in English translation helps convey the poignancy of present situation in Manipur.

Another noteworthy production is 'Nahal Nong'. Recently she has choreographed 'Agni', using diverse Manipuri dance traditions, including Lai Haraoba, Thang-Ta, and using sticks, in an ingenious manner, with ends aflame and conveying message of relevance

of fire which should ultimately lead us all to peace. These productions are well conceived and also look spectacular. While writing this article, I gather from her that she has choreographed another work titled 'Black Swan' using it as a metaphor which concerns environment.

It is pertinent to mention that Ratan Thiyam in his plays has used Manipuri dances in a creative manner to suit the plot of the play, imaginatively. The tradition thus finds an extension in theatre. Another contemporary dancer Astad Deboo has in his choreography included Thang-Ta artists giving a new dimension to his modern dance works.

From the stories of the gods and goddesses to stories of the people, Manipuri dance have made a long journey and with the emergence of young choreographers the boundaries of Manipur dances are being extended. No longer do dancers shy away from deviating from the tradition, but they boldly attempt to bring in elements of material arts which quicken the pace and invest the form with a pulsating, throbbing, vital element. No one now thinks of Manipuri dances as slow-paced, flowing meandering and gentle; instead we marvel at their ability to adapt to changes reflecting contemporary sensibilities. Whereas in villages one often sees night-long performances of Rasalilas, one is equally impressed by the bold experiments which exist side by side with the traditional performances. This has helped Manipuri dances keep pace with the changing times.