

MANIPURI DANCES : EXTENDING THE BOUNDARIES

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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 'Hayloee', 'Ingen Lei', 'Leima' 'Khamba Thoibi', as well as the stories from the Indian epics including '*Shakuntala*', '*Savitri*', '*Sita*' and '*Kumarasambhava*'.