

MANIPURI DANCE: A JOURNEY

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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 immemorial every kind of 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."