

PRESERVATION OF CLASSICAL MANIPURI DANCING

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I recollect the rare occasion in our life in 1956 when we four Jhaveri Sisters (Late Nayana and Ranjana, Suverna, Darshana) performed 5 traditional Bhangi Parengs learnt from Guru Pipin Singh, in front of three great Gurus – Ojha Amubi Singh, Ojha Atomba Singh, Ayga Amudon Sharma in Johnton High School at the premise of Jawaharlal Nehru Manipur Dance Academy founded in Imphal in 1954. We were blessed with individual certificates from them as well as Diploma from JNMDA.

Jhaveri Sisters and their Guru, Guru Bipin Singh, during their vast exposure to Manipuri Dance form realized the need for preserving, perpetuating and promoting Manipuri Dance as a Classical Dance form along with other established styles. Darshana Jhaveri is venturing to recapitulate this urge that has inspired them all these years.

During 60 years of Jhaveri Sisters' Manipuri Dance Career they had to undergo upheavals. To establish Manipuri Dance outside Manipur as one of the four major Classical Dance Styles, to propagate it through teaching, performances touring, articles, lecture Demonstrations, books, radio, TV interviews etc. was a great challenge.

As traditional and classical dancers they were conscious of the problems, difficulties and responsibilities to bring the night long Rasleelas having rich, beautiful, traditional, classical Manipuri dances performed in the temples to 2 hour recital for the proscenium stage.

In the temples the most outstanding Choreographic pattern of the Rasleela performance is the circulatory movements around the central figures of Krishna and Radha – Gopies sing and dance in a circle facing the image of Krishna & Radha and not the audience. The audiences of Krishna devotees sit on three sides outside the Rasmandal experiencing

ecstatic joy of Bhaktiras. Whereas in the theatre dancers dance on the proscenium stage, where audience sit only on front side. the audience not necessarily religious, witnesses the performance with expectations of beautiful and technically rich presentation, awaiting an aesthetic experience (Rasanubhava). This was a serious limitation which was overcome by various research oriented innovative, creative efforts reviewed herein.

Jhaveri Sisters were fortunate to have Guru Bipin Singh as their Guru for over 50 years who had vast knowledge of the Classical tradition of Ras and Sankirtan, in-depth study of the Shastras, keen aesthetic sensibility and creative ability. He delved deep into the study of ancient Indian texts on dance and music and Vaishnavite Sangeet Shastras. He guided Jhaveri Sisters to look for rare and old books on dance and music for research. He inspired them to study ancient and Vaishnavite Shastras and manuscripts of Manipur.

Jhaveri Sisters and Guru Bipin Singh realized that the rich oral tradition of Manipur Dance, preserved and insulated, will fade away in course of time under the impact and influences of modern day living with the demise of great Gurus.

With fear in mind, they started compiling through writings and recordings the oral tradition of dance and music of Rasleelas, 5 of them having stories of Krishna & Radha and 2 of Rasas having stories of childhood pranks of Krishna as also Sankirtana Bol compositions of Mridang Ragas, Sancharas, talas, tal Prabandhas and other compositions, from innumerable Gurus, each specialized in different aspects.

Guruji approached the great masters in Manipur, Cachar, Tripura and convinced them to part with the rare and hidden knowledge with them. He realized that Gurus were aware of some of the classical

elements however in their own Meitei terminology. Hence he wanted to give a scientific and methodical orientation and approach to Manipuri Dance.

Out of ongoing research, of co-relating the oral tradition with the Sangeet Shastras, Guruji and Jhaveri Sisters discovered the hidden classical elements in the prevalent dance forms of Rasleelas and Sankirtana. They continuously assimilated and adopted them to create new dance compositions having root in the tradition, bringing out the beauty of each classical element to reveal the technicalities, complexities and subtleties of Manipuri Dancing. Systematic course of six years in practical and theory was evolved, which incorporated all traditional dances, dances on various tala Parengs and compositions on different elements for effective training.

The Classical elements are :-

1. The two distinct divisions of Dance – Nartana Jagoi are Lasya – Feminine – Nupi Jagoi of Radha and Gopies and Tandava (masculine) Nipa Jagoi of Lord Krishna, child Krishna and cowherd boys of Rasleelas as well as Cholom Tandava with Pung (drum) and Kartal (bing cymbals) of Sankirtana.

2. Nritta – the pure dance – Pungloli Jagoi, having decorative and ornamental movements based on (a) Anibaddha (sara) bol compositions without tala (b) Nibaddha – on Tala (time measures ranging from 4 to 68 beats and their rhythm patterns – Alankar Punglols

– Many dance compositions on Talas like Tevda, Surfak, Tanjao, Chartal, Dashkosh, Brahmatal, Saptatal, Khujital etc. over and above Tanchep, Menkup, Chali are part of teaching course and performances.

Prabandhas are Musical Compositions having combination of elements like Pada (Poem), Pata (syllables of the drum), Swara (musical notes), Tenaka (auspicious words), Biruda (name of the poet) and Tala (time

measure). In Rasleelas and Sankirtana with different combination of these elements variety of Prabandhas are used. New compositions in separate and combination of elements are created by Guru Bipin Singh – like Swaraprabandha, Telena, Shadanga, etc.

3. Nritya – Interpretative dance which conveys meaning and sentiment of the song through facial expression, hand gestures and body movements. As Manipuris are the followers of Gaudiya Vaishnavism, Shringara, the sublimated sentiment of Love – Madhur Rasa predominates out of 9 sentiments or as per Vaishnava aesthetics Bhakti Rasa. Bhakti Rasa has 5 main Rasas – Shanta, Dasya, Sakhya, Vatsalya and Madhura and 7 subordinate Rasas – Veera, Roudra, Hasya, Karuna, Bhayanaka, Vibhatsa, Adbhuta.

Vaishnavite scholars have subdivided the Shringara Rasa into 64 divisions as well as 8 Nayikabhedas (States of heroine in love) into 64 divisions. These are traditionally performed in Sankirtan as Rasaphangnaba, Bashakphangnaba and in Nupi Bashak and Rasleelas.

Guru Bipin Singh and Jhaveri Sisters presented compositions on separate divisions of Shrinagar Rasa like Madanakshep, Sakshatdarshan etc. as well as on divisions of Nayikabhedas like Abhisarika, Bashak, Utkanthita, Vipralabdha, Khandita, etc.

Natya – Leelas – in which theme of the story is conveyed through 4 Abhinayas –

Angika – movements of different parts of the body

Vachika – poem, song, dialogue

Aharya – costumes, decor, sets

Satvika – emotional states

The Rasleelas (dance dramas) have all these histrionic representations.

For stage they condensed the Rasleelas from 7 hours to 1/2 hour giving importance to dance and dramatic elements, as well as short Dance dramas on stories of Lord Krishna & Radha.

From 1960 onwards in Manipur they presented demonstrations, participated in the seminars, to explain their scientific approach and point of view. They also demonstrated their work of co-relating the oral tradition with Shastras and presentation of performances on the stage having roots in the tradition.

Since 1960 touring was undertaken in India and abroad by Jhaveri Sisters. Their performance of Classical Manipuri dances incorporated solos, duets, groups, short dance dramas. They participated in conferences, festivals and seminars as well as promoted Manipuri Dance through articles in magazines, news papers, interviews and talks on radio and television, Lecture, Demonstrations explaining different Classical elements to different kinds of audience.

In late 60's need was felt to develop Krishna Tandava. Seeing the close relationship between Sankirtan and Rasleelas and Gurus, particularly Guru Ayga Amudon Sharma, taking inspiration from the dance movements and bol compositions from Sankirtana in Rasleela dances, Guru Bipin Singh developed Krishna Tandava by incorporating movements inspired by Pung and Kartal Cholom at suitable places, as well as acrobatic movements of Pung Cholom in certain themes like Lord Krishna meeting Radha in the guise of an acrobat aerialist in 'Bajikarvesh.' This way Krishna Tandava became more powerful and full of variety of movements. This widened the horizon of Classical Manipuri Dance.

Playing Pung (drum) by the female dancers was introduced by Guru Pipin Singh. This helped dancers to attain more depth in their dancing as well as more knowledge and confidence and helped in stage

presentation. Hence the programmes became full of variety and more impressive.

During 60s in Manipur, Rasdharis used to incorporate more dances in Rasleelas for Gopies over and above dances of Krishna, Radha and Makokchingbi, who were specially trained for 6 months for the Rasleela to be performed. Hence it was always a treat and joyful experience to watch Rasleelas in the temple courtyard.

During 70s Guru Bipin Singh once presented Nritya Ras in the temple courtyard in Manipur with all the trained dancers of their Manipuri Nartanalaya of Imphal, Kolkata and Mumbai as well as professional local singers and gave importance to Dance throughout the Rasleela, keeping the tradition intact.

Dance in Manipur expresses the most sublime in human emotions evoking Bhakti Ras in devotion to Krishna or the knowledge of the Metaphysical in Lai Haraoba.

Age-old traditions, Gurus of Dance and Music, Historical Manuscripts full of scriptural references, store the memory of dance from that are able to depict the subtle measures and complexities.

It is natural therefore, with this rich heritage in Manipuri Cultural memory, that the Rasleelas staged in the Temple Mandapas would exhibit the best there is of the dance tradition. Unfortunately, with time and customary practices, there seems to be a decline in the dancing presented, as most of the performers are non dancers. The music accompaniment are all professional and Sutradharis who sing too are superbly trained. It would therefore be very enriching to perhaps include a few trained dancers to keep the tradition alive so that Bhaktas in the temple can experience the beauty of Krishna and Radha, if it is depicted with artistry and grace.

While it is wonderful that Manipuri Classical Dance is taught in institutions and performed on stages around the world. It is most important that it is performed to its true potential in the Temple Mandapas of Manipur, where they originated.