

YAIPHABI - THE BLESSED

Priti Patel

Manipuri dance is one of the most majestic and spectacular dance traditions in India. It is unique because it is still a living form in the temples of Manipur. It is free and spontaneous, easy and flowing. It is the manifestation of a deeply ritualistic tradition, combined with a vitality with which an art form throbs, only when it is shared by the community. Therefore every event in a person's life i.e. birth, marriage or even death is celebrated through dance and music. Life is a celebration. It is a journey of the self towards uniting with the Universal Self.

The history of Manipuri dance dates back even before 33 AD. There is enough evidence to prove that a rich culture flourished in this valley, lying amidst the hills in the north-eastern border of India. The ancient religion that prevailed was animism combined with ancestor worship and the ritual practices were sustained by the dances. The ritual dances are not merely trance dances but they are an expression of sheer devotion and dedication to their Gods.

It was in the 18th century that the worship of *Krishna* was introduced. This gave birth to the *Rasleela* which are highly stylized dance-dramas, and performed even today in the temples. Today both the pre-Hindu and the Hindu religion exists side by side, and the Manipuri dance we see today is the result of an interaction between the earlier ritualistic dances and Hinduism.

Today Manipuri Dance is known for its Rasleela tradition which is only 200 years old. A region embedded in the mountains of the North East of India and having a history of a rich cultural heritage, it is amazing to see that these rare traditions are not confined to museums but are still practiced as a form of worship. And at the same time there are Gurus and dancers who have taken these forms in their individual interpretations and expressions as a performing art form on stage.

Today we see a huge divide in this tradition – The dance in the temple and the dance on the stage; the dance as a ritual and dance as an entertainment. And here lies a great challenge..... how to bring this form on stage without losing its essence and spiritually.

I first came to Manipur in 1977 and since then I have felt the need to come back again and again. Each time I came I saw and learnt something new, something vibrant and something special. I learnt that to be a Manipuri dancer I must be one of them. Dance had to be a part of my daily life. My Gurus not only taught me dance but taught me the values of life and that it was important to be a good human being. Therefore I learnt that dance is an extension of the Manipuri people, it is their signature. It therefore became important for me to study their customs, philosophy and religion, which have largely influenced their dance and music.

In Manipur the dance in ritual is a necessity, a human need. Therefore it does not face the pressure of a performance. The moment it comes on stage it is compared to other dance styles and it is constantly competing with them. This is the biggest challenge that I face as a practitioner of Manipur Dance. I am extremely proud of Manipur Dance. As a theatre spectacle, it has a delicate grace and beauty, full of intricate complexities of sinuous movements. In theme and spirit, it is the embodiment of devotion or Bhakti at its purest. This form has its own special and unique style different from other dance styles and therefore it need not be forced follow any set trends.

History tells us how the Kings and the Gurus have protected their art and culture in grave adversities and calamities. Therefore it becomes our responsibility to take this form forward as they did. A tradition that has survived for over a thousand years will survive with all our combined united efforts.

That is my faith.