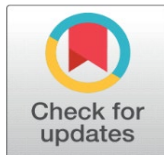
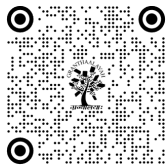


TRIPURI MEITEIS IN NATIONALIZATION OF MANIPURI DANCE: AN APPRAISAL OF THEIR CONTRIBUTIONS

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ABSTRACT

Manipur, a far northeastern state of India is known for its rich cultural heritage, prominently manifested in its performing arts. Among the performing art forms of Manipur, Manipuri Dance is regarded and well known nationally and internationally as one of the classical dances of India. It is of great importance that the great poet of India, Rabindranath Tagore institutionalized Manipuri Dance in Santiniketan and paved its way to nationalization of the dance form. And even more, of great significance, that it is the Manipuri Diasporic Community of Tripura that showcased its platform as a dance form of rich heritage and of Manipuri cultural embodiments. So far, little research and study have been done regarding the contributions of Manipuri diaspora community in Tripura and their role in the propagation of Manipuri Dance.

The paper is a humble study on the contributions of Manipuri Diaspora, notably the Manipuri Queens in Tripuri Royal citadel, aid of Tripuri kings in providing the platform which culminates into popularizing it beyond the kingdom, through the efforts of Rabindranath Tagore.

Keywords: Manipuri Dance, Manipuri Diaspora, Culture, Festivals

1. INTRODUCTION

Manipur, once a sovereign kingdom before being integrated into the Union of India in 1949 has had cordial relations with the neighboring kingdoms, notably with the Kingdom of Tripura. N. Tarunkumar Singh writes in *The Pan-Manipuris* that “Takhelleibak was the name, given by the Meiteis of Manipur to the principality of Tripura. The relation between the Meitrabak (Manipur) and Takhelleibak (Tripura) was evolved during the last three centuries” (Singh N. T., 2015, p. 23). Manipur has been known throughout history with different names like Meitrabak, Kangleipak, and Mekhali to Ahoms and Tripuris. The place where Meitei first settled in Tripura is known as Mekhlipara and even today it stands as Mekhlipara, West Tripura, unfortunately not a single Meitei resided there in present day.

There are recorded instances of political and matrimonial in both royal chronicles of the Kingdoms, Cheitharol Kumbaba of Manipur and Rajmala of Tripura.

However, there are also instances of frequent conflicts and wars between the neighboring kingdoms which also led to mass migration (notably in Seven Years Devastation 1819-1826, Manipuris took shelter in neighboring regions of Tripura, Cachar, Bangladesh, Myanmar etc.). However, regarding the settlement process of Meiteis in Tripura, matrimonial alliances as well as seeking refugee during war crisis can be regarded as the major factors that led to present day settlement of Meitei Diaspora in Tripura.

Just like any case of human civilization and history, migration is a two-way process. Tripuri people too migrated to Manipur at regular intervals such as when “Govinda Manikya of Tripura with his relatives and followers came to Manipur in the reign of Medingu Ningthoukhomba (1432-1467) and had settled there since then” (Singh N. T., 2015, p. 23). Likewise, Hindu scholars from Tripura also came to Manipur and were conferred the Manipuri family name “Yumlembam”. There were also case of warfare as when King Garibniwaz invades Tripura and won in 1734, defeating the Tripuri King Bharmia Manikya II, he was conferred the title “Takhel Ngamba” (the conqueror of Takhel).

But, the most significant relation of migration happens through matrimonial alliances. Princess of Tripura as well as princess of Manipur were given in marriage to Meitei prince or king and Tripuri Prince or king. Raja Krishnakishor’s daughter Umila Devi was married to Manipur’s prince R.K. Tilak Singh who is the grandson of great king Bhagyachandra, and in the case of Tripura, it is said that the first marriage alliance with Manipur was done during the rule of 43rd Raja of Tripura, King Taidakshin and the tradition continued thereafter till 20th century. In the royal chronicle of Manipur, Cheitharol Kumbaba, in 1609 A.D, a Meitei girl “Yangnu” was married to a Tripuri King, and this is the first matrimonial record found in the history of Manipur. Later on, through this tradition of alliance, the most significant marriage happened during the reign of King Bhagyachandra of Manipur when he married off his daughter princess Hariseswari to Tripura King Rajdhar Manikya II in 1798. Manipuri princess along with them, came retinues which were made to settle near the palace, and as mentioned above, Mekhlipara in west Tripura is the first place where Manipuris settled.

2. CONTRIBUTIONS OF MANIPURI DIASPORA OF TRIPURA IN MANIPURI DANCE

Manipuri princess and the retinues, while migrating to their new found land also brought with them their tradition, customs and cultural practices. Manipuri princess Hariseswari brought with her an idol of ‘Shri Radhamadav’ and started worshipping it by celebrating Ras Leela, for the first time outside of Manipur. When the capital of Tripura shifted to New Agartala during the reign of King Krishna Kishore Manikya, the idol was brought and installed in Radhamadhav temple at Radhanagar, Agratala, where Ras Leela is celebrated every year.

After Queen Hariseswari, during the reign of Kashichandra Manikya, he married Manipuri princess Kutilakshi. His son Krishna Kishore Manikya (1829-1849) also married Manipuri princess and girls. The next king Ishan Chandra Manikya(1849-1862) also had three Manipuri Maharanis. A fertile ground for the dissemination of Manipuri culture was born during the reign of Birchandra Manikya (1862-1896 A.D) who had Manipuri Maharanis and encouraged the development of Manipuri art forms and festivals. Among his Maharanis, Maharani Bhanumati was his most favorite and unfortunately had an early demise. Heartbroken, with the pangs of separation, he composed the famous “Prem Marichika Kabya” and Rabindranath Tagore dedicated him “Bhangnahrday”, an anthology. King

Birchandra Manikya was a great patron of art and literature and he had supported the Manipuri queens in constructing temples such as Pakhangba temple at Bnamalipur for Manipuris, and Manipuri festivals like Lai Haraoba was celebrated for the first time, introduced by Mahrani Rajeswari.

Somdev Banik, in *The Origin of Theatre in the Princely State of Tripura*, also talks about the contributions of Manipuri music in Tripura theatre, “Birchandra and his son Radha Kishore Manikya refurbished the culture frontier of the state, by openly patronizing Hindustani vocal and instrumental music, Manipuri music and dance forms, Bengali folk music and theatrical traditions, kirtans, Pachali recitations, forms of Krishna lila narrations as well as jatra performances” (Banik, 2016, p. 44).

Maharani Rajeswari’s son Radha Kishore Manikya ascended the throne later on and also had three Manipuri Maharanis. Among them, Maharani Ratna Manjuri built Lamdem Lairembi temple at Bajalghat and Maharani Tulsibati goes down in the history as the advocator of women education when she established Maharani Tulsibati Baika Vidyalaya in 1894, the first girl’s school in Tripura and still standing today. Maharani Tulsibati also composed various songs and installed temples of Lainingthou Puthiba at Abhoynagar. Many Manipuri queens constructed various temples and mandaps and with them, Manipuri culture and traditions flourished in Tripura. There are many Manipuri festivals being celebrated in Tripura, even today. Ksh. Premchandra writes about a festival Jhulan Purnima, “It is a popular dance that portrays the romance between Radha and Krishna in the gardens of Vrindavan, especially their playful acts of enjoying the swing. Like the Rasa Lila, which involves singing and dancing by professional Manipuri artists, Jhulon is also performed by young dancers who replicate the romance between Radha and Krishna” (Premchandra, 2022, pp. 1,10).

It is with no doubt that Manipuri settlers in Tripura, that came to settle through matrimonial alliances has major influences in the royal household and culture of Tripura kingdom. The presence of Manipuris in the royal family certainly help in the propagation of Manipuri culture and dance forms, even outside of Manipur. In Tripura, Manipuri festival Raas Utsav is held in great regard and is popular among the masses. It is to be noted here that Rabindranath Tagore, although first witnessed Manipuri Dance in Sylhet, his second and third and consequent encounters with Manipuri Dance happened in Tripura and he even sought help from Tripura kings and accordingly Manipuri dance teachers of Tripura were sent to teach and introduce it in Santineketan.

After introduction of Manipuri dance to Santineketan, Manipuri dance and songs are still popularized by the successive kings and queens of Tripura. For instance, when King Birbikram Kishore Manikya ascended the throne in 1928, he founded a theatre party called ‘Tripur Natya Sammilani’. Fusing Manipuri and Bengali dialogues, he composed songs and dance dramas “among his successful plays were Chand Kumudini and Sri Radha Krishna Lilabilas...They were religious in theme, with Bengali dialogues adapted to Manipuri performative practices” (Banik, 2016, p. 46). Thus, Manipuri songs, dances and performance styles are used to suit the need of the local performances in the royal court.

3. RABINDRANATH TAGORE AND THE NATIONALIZATION OF MANIPURI DANCE

Rabindranath Tagore is known widely as the great patron of art and literature. In relation to Tripura, he had visited Tripura several times and had witnessed Manipuri dance which eventually led him requesting the King to send Manipuri teachers to his newly founded Santiniketan. Indeed, Manipuri dance outside of Manipur was performed in the form of Ras leela in 1798, when Queen Hariseswori installed the Radhamandhap idol in old Agartala. Thus, began the popularization of Manipuri dance outside of Manipur, although as a form of devotion only. And from the form of devotion, Rabindranath Tagore was to secularize it from its religious connotations and institutionalized it as an artistic practice which led to the popularization of Manipuri dance in India (Khoni, 2021, p. 109).

Thus, with the royal permission, in 1919, R.K. Budhimanta Singh was sent by the then Tripura king Birendra Kishore Manikya (1909-23), although he did some formal teachings, he didn't continue for long, nevertheless in the introduction of Manipuri dance, he plays an important role. Later on, P. Nabakumar was sent to teach Manipuri dance and with Rabindranath Tagore's vision hit the mark in producing various historical pieces. Sruti Bandopadhyay in Manipuri Dance in Santiniketan: Shaping the Pedagogy of Rabindranritya, writes that "Rabindranath blended the techniques of Manipuri to give visual image to his lyrics" (Bandopadhyay, 2021, p. 72) and remarks "...almost 100yrs of Rabindranath's theatre experimentation, a pedagogy of Rabindranritya is distinctively visible, where Manipuri dance still play pivotal role" (Bandopadhyay, 2021, p. 76). These statements stand true that remarkable dance dramas like Natir Puja (1926), Saapmochon (1931), Tasher Desh (1933), Chitrangada(1937), etc. have female characters like Nati, Kamilkam Haratani and Chitrangada dancing in Manipuri tradition, reflecting the story's nuances in greatest way suitable of Tagore's vision and Nabakumar's direction. With the platform paved by Tripuri Meiteis, and with the help of Tripuri kings and Rabindranath Tagore, Manipuri teachers also began to associate with Santiniketan, as L. Biramangal writes "As Oja Nabakumar Thakur departs for Ahmedabad to teach dance, renowned Manipuri dance teacher Oja Haobam Atomba came from Manipur to teach dance in Santiniketan" (Singha, 2023, p. 22). The waves of Manipuri dance and Manipuri dance teachers in Santiniketan and both in national and international level evolves in such a way, a way put forward by visionary artists and art patrons, and Meiteis in Tripura have made abundant contributions.

Khagembam Khoni also writes about the influence of Manipuri Dance that "Many of the feminine dance items (lasya) and gestures like longlie-uplei, champra okpi, chali, etc., were used and it was gracefully accepted by the audience" (Khoni, 2021, p. 113). Manipuri dance doesn't aim to give temporary sensual pleasure, rather it is an art of devotion, of highest form of Prem-Rasa, Bhakta-Vaishnav. It is for the same reason, Rabindranath Tagore advocated for its success in the realm of Classical dance forms of India. In his article Rabindranath Tagore: His Contribution to Manipuri Dance, R.K.Jhaljit Singh writes about the star-struck experience of Rabindranath Tagore witnessing Manipuri Ras Leela in Tripura palace. He writes:

"It was a novel experience for him. The physical features of the dancers were near Mongoloid. But the Sanskrit slokas they chanted were flawless Sanskrit, in flawless Sanskrit pronunciation. The dresses of the dancers were all peculiar, not seen anywhere else in India. But the song they sang was in Bengali. The mother tongue of the dancers could not be Bengali. It was sure. It was sure enough. How did this happen" (Singh R. , 2014, p. 9).

During the reign of King Bhagyachandra (1759-1798) the idolatory worshipping of Krishna began when Krishna appeared in his dream and thereby the Abhishek of Govindaji takes place on 11th day in the month of Hiyangei, 1776 AD. In Vaishnavism, Lord Visnu when descending from heaven to earth, played Rasleela as Shri Krishna and thus the installation of Sri Govindaji at Canchipur is celebrated alongside with five continuous days of Rasa dance performance. It marks the flourishing event of Guara Vaishnavism as the state religion of Manipur. King Bhagyachandra himself plays the Mridanga(Pung) preceding the Rasa dance as the Nipa Pala (Sankirtana). Raas is defined as “the taste or the pleasure derived from the taste”. Krishna’s play with the gopis acts as a source of this dance form. It is often speculated that the themes of the story of Raas Leela is only the same in all parts of India and the Manipuri Raas Leela differs variably in the costume, presentation style, songs, dance etc. As E. Nilakanta Singh expresses in his article Bhagyachandra’s contribution to Manipuri culture, that King Bhagyachandra displayed equal regard “for the old Vaishnavite aspects of Manipuri culture and what he achieved with remarkable distinction is the integration of old faith with the new faith, keeping the cultural flow intact, dynamic and enriching at the same time the lifestyle of the people with great cultural expressions. No wonder that he is called Rajashri Bhagyachandra, an embodiment of Dharma and Punya” (Singh E. N., 2020, p. 37). Vaishnavism is thus propagated religiously, morally, culturally and politically. High ideals of dharma through the epics of Mahabharata and Ramayana became the highest form of ideology for the people of Manipur, blending in all forms of rituals and rites. And when Manipuris came in Tripura, they brought with them the high ideals of Manipuri Vaisnavism, and popularized Manipuri dance with the patronage of Tripuri Kings.

Thus, Manipuri diaspora in Tripura paved the way for the showcasing of Manipuri dance, and Rabindranath Tagore in nationalizing it as one of the Indian Classical Dances.

4. CONCLUSION

In present days, the legacy of Manipuri Dance has been carried on in Tripura as one can see in various socio-cultural practices. Most of the events are also reported in Marup, a Manipuri weekly Journal, published from Agartala, as R.K. Lilapati noted “A report on the performance of 216th Maharasa Dance (a Manipur classical dance) in Tripura..... the celebration of Bharat Ranga Mahatsava, a workshop on Manipuri dance and song, a workshop on Manipuri Rasa Lila...” and so on (Devi, 2016, p. 48). Manipuris settled in Tripura has a rich history of their own and they have contributed many in the field of Manipuri Performing arts. It is time to look into the nuances of the history of Manipuri dance as a classical dance and this paper is a humble perspective to attempt so. Any feedback regarding the paper will be appreciated and suggestions will be incorporated in later publications.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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