



Years ago, I remember when I was on holiday in Kolkata, I attempted to learn the Manipuri dance from Guru Bipin Pal, but strangely enough, though I found the form graceful, I could not keep up a sustained interest in it and found myself going back to my favourite Bharatanatyam.

The tiny state of Manipur is located on the north-eastern border of India with Assam on one side and Burma on the other. It always had, and still has a rich tradition of art and culture. Dance and music are a part of the ethos of the people. As a matter of fact, the Manipuri dance is one of the oldest forms of dance existing today and is a manifestation of a deeply ritualistic-cum-animistic tradition combined with vitality, which is a result of communal teamwork. Animistic dances of pre-Aryan times developed into ritualistic dances based on the worship of Shiva and Parvathi and, later on, after the 15th century AD, on Vaishnavite legends.



To the Manipuris, singing and dancing are an integral part of life. They claim to be the descendants of the Gandharvas and trace their roots back to Babruvahana, the son of Arjuna and Chitrangada. It is said that Babruvahana killed his father Arjuna, unknowingly, in a battle and when he realized what he had done, appealed to Krishna for help who, with the help of the Sanjeevini Mani, restored Arjuna back to life. That is why Manipur is called “Manipura” or the Land of the Gem.

Like all our dance lore, the Manipuri dance also has colourful legends associated with it. It is said that Shiva and Parvathi, inspired by the Ras Leela performed by Radha and Krishna, went into a beautiful valley which Shiva drained of water with his trident, and danced the Ras together, for seven nights and seven days, and that this valley

later became Manipur. Another famous dance, the Lai Haroba, meaning Festivity of the Gods is based on the love-story of Khamba and Thoibi, ill-fated lovers who, after a troubled courtship, died tragically as Thoibi unwittingly killed her lover and unable to bear the loss, killed herself. They were believed to be incarnations of Shiva and Parvathi.



Historical accounts of Manipur of the earlier period do not exist because King Pamheiba (1714 AD) deliberately destroyed all early records when he became a Vaishnavite. However, there is a copper plate inscription (154 AD) which refers to the cymbals and the drum introduced into dancing by King Khowai Tampak and there are also references to troupes of dancers being sent to China and, of course, there is the Lai Haroba story—and the dance connected with it, of the 11th century AD.



It is from the 18th century AD that the history of Manipur is accurate. The two principal sects of Manipur were the Maithies (Shaivites) and the Vishnupriyas. King Pamheiba persecuted the Maithies and drove their dancing underground, while encouraging Vaishnavite dancing, which developed further and came to full fruition

under his son King Jai Singh known as Bhaghyachandra. During his reign, Vaishnavism was established fully under the influence of poet-saints like Chaitanya, Vidyapati, Chandidas and Jayadeva. The Bengali script and language were also adopted by the Manipuris.

Jai Singh was himself an artist and a scholar and it is said that inspired by a vision of Krishna, he evolved the Ras dance of Manipur. Later on, the great gems in his court codified and systemized the technique and devised the beautiful Ras costumes. Soon every temple built a Ras Mantapa or a Nata Mantapa.



Bhagyachandra created the Ras Leela, Maha Ras, Vasantha Ras and Kunja Ras and the famous Achouba Bhangi Pareng which became Gostha Bhangi Pareng in his successors Chandra Kirti Singh's time. This period of about hundred years under these two kings was the golden age of the Manipuri dance.



However, it is the Lai Haroba which is the oldest dance of Manipur and which definitely belongs to the Meithi or Pre-Vaishnava period. In April or May every year, this sophisticated and polished dance form, is performed from 3 pm in the afternoon till sunset. It is based on the story of Khamba and Thoibi and is symbolic of the creation of the world. The dance goes on for about ten days and is performed by both men and women, the former dressed as warriors and the latter as priestesses. The story of creation is danced in a rambling manner, beautiful, symbolic and, sometimes, lewd and funny. Anyone can take part in this but the main dancers are known as the Maibas and the Maibis. They are dressed in white, and are supposed to have been chosen by the sylvan gods and goddesses. The dancers sometimes go into a trance, and usually perform on the village-green in front of shrines. The Lai Haroba is ritualistic and meandering, with delicate footwork and stylized hand movements, sinuous twists of the body, and expressionless faces accompanied by the *pena* (a single-stringed instrument) and by occasional singing and shouting. The dancing goes on and on, sometimes with vulgar exchanges in between! The Lai Haroba tradition is the basis of all Manipuri dance and is a strange mixture of folk dance and classical tradition.



The principal dances of Manipur, besides this, are the Ras Leela dances consisting of Kunj Ras (dealing with the meetings of Radha and Krishna in a Kunj or bower) Vasantha Ras (playing of Holi) and the Maha Ras (the celebrated circular dance of Krishna and the Gopis in Brindavan). The first is performed in the month of Ashwin, the second in Chaitra and the third in Karthik. The first annual performance of the Ras has to be in the famous Govindji temple of Imphal and, later on, it is performed in other temples. The Nitya Ras, the Nartana Ras, etc. can be performed on all auspicious occasions and are centered around Krishna, who is a young boy dancer, while the other dancers are women and girls. The costumes are out of this world and consist of stiff satin red or green skirts studded with pieces of mirror while gossamer-like veils cover the faces.

The Ras dances are lyrical, full of swaying movements, delicate footwork, light pirouettes, creeper-like movements of the hands, with periodical group tableaux around

the yellow-clad figure of Krishna. The body of the dancer curves itself into a figure of eight and the knees are kept close together and the face is tranquil. In Tandava, the Sthanakas are vigorous, and the movements are characterized by leaps and agile turns. The Chali of Manipuri is a way of walking and moving in spirals. The Tirmanams are called Parengs which are set to complex *talas* of seven beats, fifteen beats and sixteen beats. The music is slow and languorous and consists of compositions in Sanskrit or Maithali by Jayadeva, Chandidas and Vidyapati. The dancers who act as Sakhis often sing in high-pitched emotional tones accompanied by the regular singers and by instruments like the earthen drum, the flute, the cymbals and the esraj.

The Ras has a rigid technique based on ancient texts like *Govinda Sangit Lila Vilasa* and are full of Chalis, Hastas and Parengs and project through visual imagery the beauty of Krishna, etc. These are set and cannot be changed. The Ras is performed for several nights and has elaborate preliminaries called Abhisai (setting out to meet the lover) followed by songs and Bhangi Parengs, and other dances all loosely connected together and based on the Krishna theme.

The abhinaya in Manipuri is not dramatic or obvious, but is delicate and full of innuendo. The dominant Rasas are Karuna, Sringara and Vatsalya. The dominant mood of all Manipuri dances is deep devotion and a deep yearning for union with the Divine. Another variety of Manipuri is the Sankeertana—very much a product of Chaitanya's Vaishnavism consisting of singing, dancing and chanting performed at weddings, birth of sons, death of elders and so on. Sankeertana is divided into Poong Cholam (drum dance) and the Kartal Cholam (cymbal dance) performed by one or even 100 men. Danced by men dressed in white, this form is pure Nritya and is powerful and full of leaps and “turns in the air”, and, sometimes, leads to trances.



Ras Leela, Sangeet Natak Akademi

As theatre, Manipuri is delicate, graceful, beautiful; as a dance it is lyrical in its grace and vital, and in spirit it is full of Bhakti or devotion at its purest. Manipuri is as beautiful as the land in which it exists and has a delicate cameo-like beauty reminiscent of wisps of cloud floating gently across the snow-clad peaks of the Himalayas on a moonlit night.