



THE TAGORE FAMILY AND THE MANIPURI DANCE (1920-1960)

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ABSTRACT

The Classical Manipuri dance form which is a combination of traditional hand and body movement pattern with Hindu religious themes is considered as one of the finest dance forms of India. The Rasa dance with extremely ornate costume of Radha, Krishna and the Gopis (which) almost give the picture of the of the dance like celestial being visiting the earth only to perform this special dance was indeed a cultural item which not only enthralled the spectators but also left a deep impact on the mind and psyche of the people who had seen it. The continuous body, hand and feet movement along with controlled expression, which constituted the main characteristics of this style of dance, make the performances flow like poems. In the performance of Rasa dance one notices that a movement merges into another giving a sense of continuity. And thus, gestures whenever employed are almost wrapped in the basic flow of the movement while message is conveyed in an unobtrusive manner.

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INTRODUCTION

Manipuri dance, one of the six classical dance forms of India was first introduced by Gurudev Rabindra Nath Tagore in Vishwa Bharati in 1918. The poet requested the king of Tripura to depute an expert for teaching Manipuri dance in the University. Subsequently Rajkumar Budhimanta was sent to Santiniketan by the Maharaja of Tripura. Thereafter Shri Nabakumar Singh, Baikuntha Singh and Atomba Singh also joined the University as instructors of the new dance form. Rabindra Nath Tagore experimented some of his works like 'Natir Puja', 'Shapmochan', 'Shyama', 'Chitragada' etc. to be produced in the form of dance darma using the Manipuri style of dance. Since then Manipuri dance began to be popularize by various cultural organizations in the country.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Historical descriptive methodology has been use in the present study. Accordingly the work is primarily based on available published works corroborated by field investigation i.e interview of existing dance Gurus and other knowledgeable persons.

The collected data -both primary and secondary have been analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively whenever necessary.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

No serious research based study on the Bengal connection of Manipuri dance particularly of the Tagore family has so far been taken up. Beginning with Vishwa Bharati Manipuri Dance was introduced in many others established National and Regional Institutes of performing arts i.e Jawaharlal Nehru Dance Academy, Imphal, Manipuri Nartanlaya, Kolkata Anjika, Kolkata Khairagarh, Madhya Pradesh, Banasthali, Rajasthan, Rabindra Bharati, Kolkata etc. Panna Lai Roy and L. Birmangal Singh have convincingly argued that Manipuri art, dance and culture throughout the 19th & 20th centuries occupied an important chapter in the cultural history of Tripura. Starting from Harisheswori, who was married to Rajdhar Manikya (1785- 1804) down to Kashichandra Manikya (1830-1849), Birchandra Manikya (1862-1896), Birendra Kishore Manikya (1909-1923) and Bir Bikram Manikya (1928-1947) who all had married Manipuri ladies from either the aristocracy or the nobility class had played significant role in the socio-cultural life of the state (Bira Mangal, L., and Roy, Panna Lai, 2007: 133-139,150-157.).

A temple known as Radha Mandav constructed during the time of Queen Hariseshwari had been hosting yearly festival of Rasa Leela with support from the royal Court. Another temple dedicated to Pakhangba deity established under the patronage of Manipuri Tripuri Queen, Rajeshwari had also been hosting yearly Lai Haraoba festival (Bahadur Mutua 2011: 156- 157). Performance of Rasa dance at the royal palace of Tripura, indeed, had been a regular feature during the 1st half of the 20th century. The Rasa dance with the "extremely ornate costume of Radha Krishna and the Gopis (which) almost give the picture of the of the dance like celestial being visiting the earth only to perform this special dance"(Singhajit Singh R.K 2004:43) was indeed a cultural item which not only enthralled the spectators but also left a deep impact on the mind and psyche of the people who had seen it. The continuous body, hand and feet movement along with controlled expression, which constituted the main characteristics of this style of dance, make the performances flow like poems. R.K. Singhajit wrote, " One movement merges into another giving a sense of continuity Gestures whenever employed are almost wrapped in the basic flow of the movement while message is conveyed in an unobtrusive manner""(Singhajit Singh R.K 2004:55).

It was in such a socio-cultural world of the then princely state that starting from the days of Birchandra Manikya onwards nobel laureate Rabindra Nath Tagore had opportunity to witness a number of the Rasa performances . Through numerous visit including five trips during the reign of Birchandra his relationship with the Tripura royalty continued and grew over time till his death in 1941. They were so close that once, on the request of Radhakishore in 1905, Rabindra Nath had given extensive commentaries on the annual budget of the Princely state, Hvhich normally used to be the privileged of the of the king. Radhakishore indeed was also the first person of the whole country to donate a substantial fund for the dream project 'Viswa Bharati' of Rabindra Nath which was subsequently established in 1918(Chaudhuri Bikach, 2009: 19). In 1941 the King of Tripura Bir Bikram Manakya had conferred 'Bharat Bhaskar' honour to the nobel laureate at Santiniketan (Chaudhuri Bikach, 2009: 19). Rabindra Nath Tagore had always regarded the language of sound and movement to be an important means of self expression without which people would remain inarticulate. Himself a great composer, he wrote dance dramas, operas in addition to a number of songs. The poet, was always on the lookout for an appropriate medium through which his poetic ideas and sensibilities could be expressed. Manipuri dance style, indeed" cast its magic spell upon him for in the plastic grace and fluid lines of its movements Tagore found an echo of what he himself had tried to speak through his music popularly known as Rabindrasangeet" (Singh Atomba Guru Haobam and Devi Ritha, 1963).

Ritha devi wrote "The soft supple undulations of the body, the swaying, gliding, lightly turning movements the unobtrusive yet infinitely varied footwork and the petalled beauty of fingers forming naive but delicately expressive mudras- all these charmed his senses and appealed directly to his heart"" (Singh Atomba Guru Haobam and Devi Ritha, 1963). Subsequently Manipur dance was offered for the first time in 1918 at Vishwa Bharati. On the request of the poet, Rajlumar Budhimanta was sent to Santiniketan by the Maharaja of Tripura. The dance Guru, however did not stay long in Bengal as he was appointed Senior Superintendent of 'Shilpashram', a

pioneer institution which had initiated a number of measures for transforming the hand loom and other artisanal productions of Tripura. The 'BM Singh & Watch Co' at Agartala bears testimony to his entrepreneurial skill. Singh Dhanaswar Sanasam,2001:13-14). He was replaced by Nabakumar Singh from Tripura. Another Manipuri, Baikuntha Singh also joined the faculty almost simultaneously on the recommendation of the king. Within a few years of rigorous teaching and training in 'Chali', and 'Bhangis' of Rasa which were the essential hand, feet and body movements, the Bhavan prepared the necessary foundations to bring out productions based on Gurudev's numerous creative works. In 1926, the students of Sangeet Bhavan of the university staged 'Natir Pooja' where Manipuri Dance was used for the first time with Nabakumar as the Manipuri dance teacher. Devjani Chaliha wrote,

In Natir Pooja acting attained a new dimension where Rabindra Nath's song found expression in the dance of Sreemati (Tagore) under the direction of Nabakumar Singh. The Bhakti Raasa of Manipuri dance was the medium in which the sublime Bhakti found its ultimate expression"(Devjani Chaliha, 1999:28). Natir Pooja was performed twice in Santiniketan and soon after in Calcutta. Encouraged, the poet planned to stage the Geeta Kavya 'Nataraj'. The poet recited poems himself and for the first time a whole dance sequence was based on Manipuri(Devjani Chaliha, 1999:28). Later on when Nataraj was staged although a Kathakali dancer, applied his own technique in his dance, " the main acting was based on Manipuri style"(Devjani Chaliha, 1999:28). Nabakumar also produced the dance sequences for some other important works of Rabindra Nath such as Shapmochan,Shyama and Chitrangada. During those days according to Devjani chaliha methodical teaching for Manipuri did not go for long but the core style of Manipuri was used in various productions (Devjani Chaliha, 1999:28). A new genre of dance usually known as Tagore Dance' gradually emerged . And this was a great contribution for Nabakumar. For sometime the dance Guru left Vishwabharati for some other prestigious assignments at Ahmedabad, Bombay and Delhi only to rejoin Shantiniketan in 1955 as a dance teacher.

Closely associated with the Bhavan was H. Atomba Singh of Manipur whom Tagore had seen dancing as a young man in course of his travels to Assam (Singh Atomba Guru Haobam and Devi Ritha, 1963:1963). Atomba stayed at Shantiniketan for 15 years teaching and researching on Manipuri dance. Under strict norms and discipline the Guru trained the students in finer aspects of Chali, small as well as big Bhangis etc.. Rabindra Nath was extremely impressed by the works of Atomba Singh. Ritha Devi wrote that in Atomba's style of dance, "Tagore found an echo of what he himself had tried to speak through his music, popularly known a 'Rabindra-Sangeet'. It seemed to him the ideal vehicle for the lilting melodies and soothing candenses of his songs, the apt technique to give visual form to the abstract fantasies of his creation and the fanciful flights of his imagination"(Singh Atomba Guru Haobam and Devi Ritha, 1963:1963). During his long association Atomba gave many pupils, the benefit of his immense repertoire and vast knowledge among them being Nandita Kripalini, the poet's grand daughter (Singh Atomba Guru Haobam and Devi Ritha, 1963:1963). For his outstanding performance as a teacher and choreographer "Kabi Guru gave himself a gold medal certificate as a mark of recognition for his services. Dr. Kalidas Nag also awarded him several medals and certificates"(*Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 1975).

In the late 1930s, Rajkumar Senarik Singh from Silchar (Assam) also joined the Bhavan as a teacher of Manipuri dance and taught the students for seven years. Subsumed within the overall initiatives of Rabindra Nath Tagore to promote Manipuri dance in Bengal were the relatively less known activities of Somendra Nath Tagore and Shrimati Tagore (husband and wife) who established 'Nritya Kalaya' with its main office at Elgin road, (Jorashanko) in the late 1930's. Nritya Kalalaya tried to take the beauty of Indian classical dances particularly the Manipuri style to the well known cultural institutions across the country. With herself as a performer Shrimati was on a talent hunt spree. Subsequently in the last part of 1937 Rajkumar Surjaboro Sana and his son Priya Gopal Sana joined Nritya Kalaya where the duo taught and trained many students on different aspects of Manipuri dance particularly Khamba dance, Shiva dance, Rasa dance etc. After the expiry of Surjaboro, Priya Gopal assisted by his lifelong associate Laishram Lakshman Singh, the Master percussionist continued the earlier practice of teaching students and giving performance in established cultural centres and institutes of Maharashtra, Bengal and Gujarat under the supervision of Shrimati Tagore.

In 1941, Nritya Kalaya staged a performance at New Empire hall. Priya Gopal gave 3 items ie, Mahadeva dance, Khamba dance and Pala Cholom while Lakshman Singh performed 'Naad Mala' (playing of nine Tabla at a time) and Anganao (playing of two Khanjuris) (Unpublished memoir of Laishram Lakshman Singh in the custody of Prof. L. Loken of D.M. College of Arts, Imphal). In 1942, a Nritya Kalalaya got an assignment to teach Manipuri dance at Bharatya Vidya Bhavan, Bombay. While 30 students were trained to give a performance of 'Kansa Bhada' by Priya Gopal Lakshman Singh taught the students how to play Khanjuri and Manipuri Mridangam (Unpublished memoir of Laishram Lakshman Singh in the custody of Prof. L. Loken of D.M. College of Arts, Imphal). During this period, the troupe gave a performance at Regal hall which was widely acclaimed. Priya Gopal Sana and Lakshman Singh subsequently proceeded to Ahmedabad under the instruction of Shrimati Tagore. However, due to ill health they came back to Calcutta again and in June 1942, the Japanese bombarded 3 places at Imphal. Another great name who helped in the promotion of Manipuri dance is Uday Shankar who opened his dream institute, 'Uday Shankar India Culture Centre' at Almora with the 20000 pounds he had received on donation from the Darlington hall trust (Shankaran N.K. Shiva and Shankar Uday, 2002:19-31). Along with teachers of other Indian classical dances Uday invited Amubi Singh of Manipur to teach Manipuri dance to the students. Although the centre was closed in 1944 the centre reopened again at Calcutta in 1960 where Th. Tarunkumar of Imphal and Devjani Chalia, both students of the legendary Guru Amubi Singh taught for some time. Although Uday Shankar, during those days, was engaged in "innovative dance" which infact was creative dance in common parlance, he treated Manipuri style with love and care. In a conversation with Sandhya sen Uday said that "Most of my ballets are based on Kathakali blended with eloquent charm of Manipuri"(Sen Sandhya, 2000:11-12). His wife Amala Shankar had also agreed with him and stated "when the expression (Uday Shankar) was analysed after performance it was found to belong to Kathakali or Manipuri"(Sen Sandhya, 2000:11-12). It must be pointed out in this context that the Manipuri maestro Amubi Singh continued to associate with him and his till 1948 even after the closure of the Almora centre.

In 1955 the Government of West Bengal established the West Bengal State Academy of dance, drama, music and visual arts at Jorasahko under an agreement with the Rabindra Bharati Society which controlled the property of the late nobel laureate Dr. B.C. Roy the then Chief Minister of West Bengal suggested that Uday Shankar, Ahindra Chowdury and Ramesh Banerjee be put in charge of Dance, Drama and Music respectively. Subsequently, Uday Shankar requested his former associate, Guru Amubi Singh for Manipuri experts. In 1956, August, the first National scholarship test for Manipuri Dance, sponsored by the government of India was held at Nabadwip, West Bengal. Pandit Atombapu Sharma and Guru Amubi Singh were to be the experts of the selection Committee. On the recommendation of Guru Amubi T. Nadiya Singh was appointed as a teacher of the academy. Nodia Singh wrote that on numerous occasions Uday Shankar had not only insisted for observance of strict norms but also encouraged the students to spontaneously respond by various forms of dance movements to music. This was actually what he meant by innovative / creative dance (Singh Tourangbam Nadiya, 1990:23-28). Subsequently Uday Shankar resigned from the academy although it became the nucleus for the Rabinda Bharati University which was established in 1962. Devjani Chaliha who joined the department of dance retired in 1992. After her Kalabati Devi, Eva Singh and Mala Majumdar also teach Manipuri dance in Rabindra Bharati University.

It is important to note that after the establishment of J.N. Academy at Imphal in 1956 under the stewardship of Guru Amubi Singh, many students of Manipuri dance from different institutes of the country including West Bengal began to come to Imphal for intensive training in the dance form. In Viswabharati Prof. Jitendra Singh, Y. Hemanta Kumar and K. Sunita Devi taught Manipuri dance. Accompanists in Mridangam are Kh. Premjit Singh and Bocha Singh. In music Binodini Devi was the teacher in charge.

Conclusion

After the demise of Rabindra Nath many organizations in Bengal particularly " Meitei Jagoi" (Devajani Chaliha), Manipuri Nartanalaya (late Guru Bipin), Anjika (Preeti Patel), Geeta Bithi (Naba Ghanashyam) etc. have been engaged in manifold activities of Training, Research, Publications, Creative Works etc. As on today 'Khairagarh' in Madhya Pradesh, 'Banasthali' in Rajasthan, 'Rabindra Bharati' and 'Viswa Bharati' in West Bengal, and 'Manipur University', Canchipur offer B.A, M.A and Ph.d Courses in Manipuri Dance. Some universities and institutes outside India have also begun to offer Manipuri dance as a course of study and performance. In the United States, a few Bengali organizations which put up Rabindra Nritya Natyas incorporated Manipuri dance. In Sri Lanka, Wikrama Singha Bandara a student of Rabindra Bharati has opened Manipuri dance at university level.

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