



MANIPURI DANCE AND IT'S COMPLEXITY

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Abstract: Manipuri dance had been appreciated as one of the classical dances of India, still the study of the aesthetics of Manipuri dance is totally new. In fact, as of now, the study of dance aesthetics especially the dances of the Meiteis is quite controversial both in the place of its birth as well as in the rest of India.

Part of the confusion lay in analyzing the evolution of the dances from its folk and primeval beginnings to a more sophisticated codified and structured form as a result of cultural assimilation with the world of Hinduism. In Manipur, as well as outside of Manipur not much of the studies had been done on the critical issues of how the culture of the Meiteis evolved from a primal setting to a refined form later in history. This may be due to the lack of study of cultural history in Manipur, though there had been extensive writings on the subject of Manipuri classical dances as being evolved from the Lai-Haraoba dances of old. The problem was the lack of structural study of the ancient dance form of the Meitei and how these structural features of the Manipuri non-Hindu dances were incorporated into the classical dances.

On the other hand, dance gurus and traditional indigenous scholars and practitioners of the seventies were not agreeable to the assumption that the Manipuri classical dances evolved from an application of the principles of Sanskrit poetics, notably Natya Shastra. Though many contemporary studies in mainstream India as well as in educated Manipuri elite circles also contribute to this mainstream belief, the old teachers of Jawaharlal Nehru Manipur Dance Academy, established in 1954 under the auspices of late Prime Minister of India, still maintain a fond belief that Manipuri classical dances had its own codes, practices, gestural forms and movement behaviour, body postures etc. which was substantially refined by itself before the coming of Hinduism. They therefore firmly held that Manipuri dances itself was substantially of a high standard of sophistication, and that when Rajarshi Bhagyachandra (1763-1798) founded the Raas Leela, he only had to introduce all the existing movement forms within the new genre of performance.

The problem therefore is to undertake a serious performative study of the dances of the Meiteis from the earliest times and attempt to discover certain principles of the conceptions of the laws of beauty as understood by the indigenous Manipuri and define those principles as they existed in historical times.

Keywords: *Aesthetics of Manipuri dance, Challenges, Meiteis indigenous concept, Performative study, and Sanskrit poetics.*

Problems of Approaches to Meitei Dance Study

The study of the research is the study of the dance aesthetics of the Meitei of Manipur, a new subject of research in dance scholarship. Though Manipuri (Meitei) dance had been appreciated as one of the classical dances of India, the study of the aesthetics of Meitei dance is totally new. In fact, as of now, the study of dance aesthetics especially the dances of the Meiteis is quite controversial both in the place of its birth as well as in the rest of India.

Part of the confusion lay in analyzing the evolution of the dances from its folk and primeval beginnings to a more sophisticated codified and structured form as a result of cultural assimilation with the world of Hinduism. In Manipur, as well as outside of Manipur not much of the studies had been done on the critical issues of how the culture of the Meiteis evolved from a primal setting to a refined form later in history. This may be due to the lack of study of cultural history in Manipur, though there had been extensive writings on the subject of Manipuri classical dances as being evolved from the Lai-Haraoba dances of old. The problem was the lack of structural study of the ancient dance form of the Meitei and how these structural features of the Manipuri non-Hindu dances were incorporated into the classical dances. Cultural enthusiasts of our fore-father's generation in the seventies

and eighties had to undertake intense arguments with visiting Indian scholars and authorities on defining the status and identity of Manipuri dances, which was being recognized as one of the classical dances of India. Many visitors and enthusiasts of Manipuri dance from outside were prone to examine the dances of the Meiteis under the rules and regulations and aesthetic principles as understood from the Shastraic traditions of the Indian culture.

On the other hand, dance gurus and traditional indigenous scholars and practitioners of the seventies were not agreeable to the assumption that the Manipuri classical dances evolved from an application of the principles of Sanskrit poetics, notably Natya Shastra. Though many contemporary studies in mainstream India as well as in educated Manipuri elite circles also contribute to this mainstream belief, the old teachers of Jawaharlal Nehru Manipur Dance Academy, established in 1954 under the auspices of late Prime Minister of India, still maintain a fond belief that Manipuri classical dances had its own codes, practices, gestural forms and movement behaviour, body postures etc. which was substantially refined by itself before the coming of Hinduism. They therefore firmly held that Manipuri dances itself was substantially of a high standard of sophistication, and that when Rajarshi Bhagyachandra (1763-1798) founded the Raas Leela, he only had to introduce all the existing movement forms within the new genre of performance. Manipuri dance elders feel that the beauty and identity of the Raas Leela should not be viewed as being dependent on aesthetic principles introduced from mainland India.¹ This view of the traditional scholars has some importance in the research of the aesthetics of Meitei dance attempted by this scholar as the indigenous aesthetic knowledge had become a subject matter of global importance in contemporary times. The study would help to clarify the controversy, since the indigenous knowledge systems need to be first prioritized before we come to the issue of cultural assimilation.

The problem before the researcher is therefore to undertake a serious performative study of the dances of the Meiteis from the earliest times and attempt to discover certain principles of the conceptions of the laws of beauty as understood by the indigenous Manipuri and define those principles as they existed in historical times. With this study we should try to analyse the structural evolution of that form as it came under the influence of the world religion of Hinduism. Only from that proper study, shall we be able to state the real status and identity of the classical dances of Meiteis. It is true to believe that the classical dance tradition of what we now know as the Manipuri is the product of the synthesis between two cultures-notably what is presented by the Indian classical texts under Hinduism and the performance tradition of the Manipuri under the Meitei religion. The aim of this research is the attempt to unearth the processes of this synthesis.

As we go along this research we shall have to keep in mind that it is a practice-led-research, i. e. the study of the dance form as is practised and lived with the Manipuri dancer. As we grow with knowledge that a dance practitioner is aware of the movement techniques and gestural principles of her or his body. We begin to discover that there are certain differences between the Manipuri dancer and the mainstream classical Indian dancer on the way how they use their bodies in performance. It is not difficult to discern that a Bharat Natyam dancer of South India and a Manipuri dancer from North East India have completely contrasting body techniques in their dance presentations. The Bharat Natyam dancer uses angular body movements while the Manipuri uses curvilinear, flowing and continual movement. The Bharat Natyam dancer has ample resources in archaeological and other textual sources to examine the authenticity of their body movements, while the Manipuri dancer has to depend on what is physically handed down by the elders as tradition. Though the ancient scriptures are rich and varied, yet not much of technical information were incorporated into the prevailing texts, and stone archaeology was rather rare in Manipur as the Manipuri culture was more reliant on bamboo and wood technologies. What were most beneficially inherited by the Indian dancer in her body practice are the rich sculptural resources from the ancient temples and stone architectures of the past. Kapila Vatsayan, the doyen of Indian classical dances, noted that “the overwhelming sculpturesque quality of the Indian dance has been mentioned, we observed how the Indian dancer seemed to aim at attaining the perfect pose, the moment of perfect balance, after a series of movements in time. The Indian sculptor in turn tries to capture cosmic movement the perfection of rhythm and line; he also attempts to arrest the rapturous intensity and abandon of dance movement.”ⁱⁱ

What we experience in Manipuri however is that our classical dance movements are not movement to denote a fixed and statuette-like representation in a gesture. Our hand gestures are simple and do not show fixity, a deliberateness and precise nature in the sign and symbol. Our bodies are habituated in fluid nature of movement which seems to indicate a graceful flow into eternity. Our gestures though sometimes similar in figure formations with those of the Indian dances, yet they are not as precise as that of the Indian mudras. The interpretations of the symbols indicated by the hastas too are different in many ways.

Many of the literatures produced by the mainstream dance scholars find affinities between the Manipuri and Indian classical dance systems through subscription by the newly discovered Manipuri classical dances to the principles of sanskritized vocabularies of movement and rhythm as enunciated by the texts. However our elders' generation would rather be discreet to feel there is something different in our dance systems. When in 1971 there was a unique conference at the Jawaharlal Manipur Dance Academy, where great stalwarts of Indian dancers were present, notably Sabita Ben Mehta and the Jhaveri Sisters etc. and others, there were intense participation of the local elders, who felt it was wrong on the part of the Manipuri dance practitioner to attempt too much to have our dance gestures imitating Indian Mudra systems. They feel that our gestures outwardly seemed to speak very little, but they spoke much (eehai haiba maandana yaamna haiba). They also strongly feel that the anklets should not be depended upon for giving rhythm to the movements. They also felt that Hindustani musical instruments should not follow the Meitei song systems. They also keenly felt that whatever elements of Meitei culture that entered into the making of the Raas Leelas should be

meticulously researched. They emphasized that the Sanskrit shastras would not be able to provide an identity to the Raas dances. The entire congregation agreed that there should be intense research into the old Lai-Haraoba dance systems to find the roots of the Raas dances.ⁱⁱⁱ

Towards a Native World View – Ethno-Philosophy

This native feeling generated in the seventies had not been duly emphasized in later research in the Manipuri dances. It was because the discipline of Ethno-philosophy, which was discovered by African philosophers were not yet discovered in Manipur. Ethno-philosophy or the philosophy of ethnic communities from their own emic angles is an interesting enquiry into the thought processes and cultural consciousness of a distinctive human group with common heritage, common language and common ethnological possessions which have singular unity of character. Ethno-philosophy then is a reflection on the variety of human experience by a homogenous human group on the fringe of civilization (or even primitive standards) with a rational, methodological, and systematic understanding of the world around them.^{iv} This system of their knowledge provides means of understanding how the people of Manipur perceive their own culture and how they related to their environment. The study of their religion of the Meitei, namely Sanamahee worship should be essential to find the justification of their dance expressions, since dances were always a part of people's religious development.

Along with the study of the indigenous knowledge system of the Meiteis in order to understand the background culture of the development of the dances, we come to the final point of our study, namely the aesthetic principles of the Meitei dance systems, which is the main focus of the research. Aesthetics, according to the Chambers 21st century dictionary is the branch of philosophy concerned with the study of the principles of beauty, especially in art. It is also the study of the principles of good taste and the appreciation of beauty. Aesthetics is also a specific regime for identifying and reflecting on the arts, a mode of articulation between ways of doing and making, their corresponding forms of visibility, and possible ways of thinking about their relationships.^v

According to Judith Lynn Hanna, an American authority of the dances "the Aesthetic experience involves sensory elicitation of rapt attention and the contemplation of a phenomenon's immanent and/or the transcendent meanings at the emotional-affective, cognitive and behaviour-action levels".^{vi} Probing further on the search for meaning, she finds out the grammar of the signs that dances provide through syntactics, that the rules dictating how signs may be combined, to the grammar of how the realm of movement, style and structure is related to the realm of meaning. Syntactics is critical to aesthetics viewed as appropriateness and competency.^{vii} These important critical ideas help us to understand the notions and inter-relations of the Manipuri body (especially the female body) with that of space, rhythm, dynamics and characteristics of body usage in time.

Since aesthetics had been relegated to higher realms of philosophy, we are daunted with the problem of understanding the subjects of aesthetics in three important ways, i.e. in terms of analyzing how the western philosophers saw aesthetic problems since the Greeks upto the present, thereby stressing our efforts to various philosophical problems from Aristotle to Kant, etc. which is indeed beyond the purview of this present research. The second problem was of learning how Sanskrit poetics, under the vast and dynamic Indian philosophical systems influenced the understanding of the Bhakti traditions emerging from South Indian to the North Indian religious centres like Brindavan, then to Bengal and Assam and later to Manipur, as well as Manipur's contribution to the Bhakti ethos. This indeed is an extremely stimulating exercise, which at this time of effort, though important, the present researcher can only depend on relevant issues which shall enhance the subject of the cultural assimilation of the Manipuri into the Indian mainstream. The contribution of the poet Tagore to the nationalization of the Manipuri dances side by side with the native expansion of the fame of Manipuri in the twentieth century could also be mentioned in the main body of the research.

The third main focus, which is the subject of the present researcher, is the discovery of the indigenous world view of the people and how they saw and perceived their own dance systems as part of their own religion and culture, and how they developed their own conceptions of the laws of beauty of their dances. This is to study the indigenous texts available on the dances, describe the ways how the ancient elders left their impressions on the dances as especially from the researcher dancer's angle and from the point of view of the dance performer. The study of the dance idioms that lay in the performance behaviour of the Meitei women in their ritual traditions, in their social dance festivals as well as their conversion into the world culture of Hinduism and the unique making of the Raas Leela need to be brought into the researcher's work. Because of the vast nature of the repertoire of the Meitei dances, it would be fair that we include the dance style in the Nata Sankirtana by the male dancers, which is indeed a unique item belonging to Manipuri alone. However, the subject of dance aesthetics of the Meitei is indeed vast and enormous since various clans, and communities had entered into the formation of the Meitei nation and we cannot undertake a field research of many of the varied forms of ritual dances still surviving in various culture areas like that of the Chapkpa, Moirang, and Kakching. Due to lack of resources, time and material at our command, we could emphasize on the main representative Meitei culture of the Kanglei, which was at the core of the Meitei universe. We shall examine the unique

performance system as representative culture and try to derive aesthetic principles as believed as true and good from their cultural context. The study then shall attempt to be performance bound, informed no doubt by the available indigenous sources at our disposal. The body of the Manipuri female dancer shall definitely be an important focus of the research. Though the study shall be the Kanglei performer, there may be inputs of cross-cultural analogies and differences to identify the unique Meitei aesthetics. We shall not exclude important, needed references from the other dance styles. This concentrated focus on the performance of the Meitei dancer shall enable us to analyse the movements, gestures, and expressions of the Manipur dancers, along with the context and environment of the dance event itself. To understand the kine-aesthetic principles of the Manipuri dancer's body it is necessary to examine the typical physio-kinetic properties to define how the curves, circles, waves and flows became the distinctive character of the Meitei dances.

REFERENCES

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- ⁱⁱ Kapila Vatsyayan, *Classical Indian Dance in Literature and the Arts*, 1st ed. (New Delhi: Sangeet Natak Akademi, 1968), 262.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Elangbam Nilakanta Singh, ed., 1975, 31.
- ^{iv} Paulin Hautondji (Born 11 April 1942 in African Cote d'ivoire, a Benenese philosopher was one of the modern pioneers of African ethno-philosophy. He coined the phrase "ethno-philosophy", which he identified as "a defined thought-pattern and a permanent temptation of Africanist discourse". He also mentioned that Ethno-philosophy has been used to record the beliefs found in African culture.African philosophy as consisting of shared beliefs, values, categories and assumptions that are implicit in the language, practices and beliefs of African cultures.)
- ^v Jacque Ranciere, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, the Tower Building, 11 York Road, London SE1 7NX, 80 Maiden Lane, Suite 704, NY 10038, 2004), 13.
- ^{vi} Judith Lynne Hanna, *To Dance is Human: A Theory of Nonverbal Communication* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press Ltd., 1979), 38.
- ^{vii} *Ibid*, 44.