



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

The Poetics Of Performance: A Critical Appraisal Of Guru Thiyam Tarunkumar's Aesthetic Vision In Manipuri Dance

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Abstract

Guru Thiyam Tarunkumar Singh occupies a pivotal yet critically underexamined position within the historiography of Manipuri dance. Despite his wide recognition among practitioners, disciples, and institutional collaborators, scholarly literature has not adequately addressed his multidimensional contributions to the preservation, transmission, pedagogy, and theatrical reconfiguration of Manipuri dance in the twentieth century. This study undertakes a rigorous critical appraisal of Tarunkumar's artistic oeuvre by employing Performance Theory (Richard Schechner) and Cultural Transmission Theory as its analytical frameworks.

The article argues that Tarunkumar functioned simultaneously as a performer, pedagogue, choreographer, and cultural transmitter who expanded Manipuri dance beyond its ritual-sacred milieu into national and international theatrical spaces. Through disciplined embodiment, restored behavior, and systematized pedagogic practice, he rearticulated traditional aesthetics for contemporary audiences while retaining the devotional ethos central to Manipuri performance culture. The study further examines his apprenticeship under Guru Amubi Singh, his rigorous training methodologies, his institutional engagements, and his choreographic innovations that shaped the modern Manipuri dance renaissance.

The study brings critical attention to a figure long marginalized within mainstream cultural historiography, demonstrating the pressing need to document and rigorously evaluate gurus whose foundational contributions remain obscured despite their decisive influence on the continuity of Manipuri artistic heritage. Through this appraisal, the research establishes that Tarunkumar's oeuvre forms a vital connective axis between ritual practice and modern performance, offering an essential analytical framework for interpreting the evolving poetics and aesthetic transformations of Manipuri dance.

Keywords: Manipuri dance; Guru Thiyam Tarunkumar; performance poetics; cultural transmission; dance pedagogy; embodied practice.

Introduction

Manipuri dance occupies a distinctive position within the classical performance traditions of South Asia due to its devotional aesthetics, ritual embodiment, and spiritually inflected movement vocabulary. Emerging from the Vaishnavite cultural matrix of Manipur, the tradition evolved through Ras Lila, Sankirtana, martial practices, and temple-based performance lineages that collectively shaped its sacred and performative identity. The continuity of this tradition has historically depended upon the labor, discipline, and cultural stewardship of gurus who transmitted embodied knowledge across generations. Yet, within this lineage, several key figures remain insufficiently documented in academic discourse. Among them, Guru Thiyam Tarunkumar Singh stands out as a foundational but comparatively understudied architect of twentieth-century Manipuri dance.

Born in 1912 at Uripok Haobam Dewan Leikai in Imphal to Thiyam Tonyaima Singh and Thiyam Ongbi Sanatombi Devi, Tarunkumar emerged from a lineage deeply embedded in the artistic and cultural traditions of Manipur. Despite receiving formal schooling only up to class five, his intellectual curiosity and autodidactic discipline enabled him to acquire proficiency in English, Bangla, Sanskrit, and Meitei Mayek. His life trajectory exemplifies the formation of a self-cultivated artist whose aesthetic sensibilities were shaped through rigorous practice, perseverance, and spiritual commitment to dance. Although popularly remembered as the father of internationally renowned theatre director Ratan Thiyam, such an association risks overshadowing Tarunkumar's own artistic identity. In reality, he was a major force in shaping Manipuri dance through his contributions as performer, pedagogue, choreographer, institution builder, and cultural transmitter.

To critically examine Tarunkumar's artistic and pedagogic legacy, this study employs Performance Theory (Richard Schechner) and Cultural Transmission Theory as its conceptual frameworks. Schechner's notion of *restored behavior*—rehearsed, repeatable, and culturally inherited actions—offers a productive lens for understanding Manipuri dance, which itself is sustained through codified gestures, rhythmic structures, and devotional expressions transmitted across generations. Complementing this, Cultural Transmission Theory elucidates how Tarunkumar extended Manipuri dance beyond its ritual-sacred geography into institutional, pedagogic, and theatrical spaces across India and abroad. His work demonstrates how cultural traditions endure through disciplined transmission from guru to disciple, and how embodied memory becomes a vehicle for sustaining artistic heritage.

By situating Guru Thiyam Tarunkumar within these theoretical frameworks, the study addresses a significant gap in Manipuri dance scholarship and foregrounds the necessity of documenting gurus whose contributions remain marginalized within mainstream cultural historiography despite their foundational role in shaping the modern trajectory of Manipuri performance.

Objectives of the Study

1. To critically evaluate the artistic, pedagogic, and aesthetic contributions of Guru Thiyam Tarunkumar within the broader continuum of the Manipuri dance tradition, with particular attention to his role in shaping twentieth-century performance practices.
2. To analyze Guru Tarunkumar's performative and choreographic vocabulary through the conceptual lens of Richard Schechner's Performance Theory, especially the notions of restored behavior, embodiment, and performative transmission.

3. To examine Tarunkumar's role in the transmission, dissemination, and cultural mobility of Manipuri dance across regional, national, and international contexts, highlighting the mechanisms through which embodied knowledge travels beyond its ritual-sacred origins.
4. To assess his contributions to institutional development, pedagogic systems, and theatrical choreography, and to situate these contributions within the evolving landscape of Manipuri dance modernization and cultural preservation.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretative, and interdisciplinary research methodology grounded in performance studies, dance anthropology, and cultural historiography. The analysis draws upon:

- Textual and archival sources related to Manipuri dance history and pedagogy
- Historical interpretation of performance lineages and institutional developments
- Oral narratives and practitioner testimonies from dancers, disciples, and cultural informants
- Secondary literature on performance theory, cultural transmission, and Indian classical dance traditions

Richard Schechner's Performance Theory provides the primary analytical framework for interpreting Tarunkumar's performative identity, particularly through the concepts of *restored behavior*, *embodied repetition*, and *ritual-theatrical transformation*. Complementing this, Cultural Transmission Theory is applied to examine the mechanisms through which Tarunkumar preserved, codified, and disseminated Manipuri dance across geographical and institutional boundaries.

An appraisal-based analytical approach is used to evaluate the aesthetic, pedagogic, and institutional dimensions of his legacy, situating his contributions within the broader discourse of Manipuri dance history, cultural continuity, and intangible heritage preservation.

Significance of the Study

This study holds significant scholarly value because Guru Thiyam Tarunkumar remains an underrepresented yet foundational figure in the historiography of Manipuri dance. Despite his extensive contributions to choreography, pedagogy, institutionalization, and cultural dissemination, his legacy survives largely through oral narratives and embodied performance traditions, with limited academic documentation.

By foregrounding Tarunkumar's contributions, the study:

- Expands the academic discourse on Manipuri dance through the application of Performance Theory and Cultural Transmission Theory
- Illuminates the relationship between dance, discipline, embodiment, and cultural continuity within a sacred-performative tradition
- Addresses a critical gap in cultural historiography by documenting a guru whose influence has been overshadowed despite his central role in shaping the modern Manipuri dance renaissance
- *Contributes to the preservation of Manipuri intangible cultural heritage*, emphasizing the urgency of scholarly engagement with neglected gurus and their artistic lineages

In summative reflection, the study underscores the necessity of systematic academic documentation to safeguard the embodied knowledge systems that sustain Manipuri dance across generations.

Guru Tarunkumar in the Classical Lineage of Guru Amubi

In the landscape of Manipuri dance historiography, the names of Guru Amubi Singh, Haobam Atomba, and Amudon Sharma consistently dominate academic narratives, with Guru Amubi Singh receiving particular acclaim for his creative innovation, aesthetic refinement, and foundational influence on the formation of modern Manipuri performance. Yet the generation of gurus who succeeded him—those who sustained, expanded, and transmitted the tradition—often remain obscured in mainstream scholarship despite their substantial contributions. Guru Thiyam Tarunkumar Singh, a direct inheritor of Guru Amubi Singh's classical lineage, stands as a compelling example of this scholarly marginalization.

Thirty-one years younger than Guru Amubi, Tarunkumar served not merely as an assistant but as a close collaborator who played a crucial role in composition, pedagogy, and the refinement of performative detail. As Rajkumar Danisana notes in *Manipuri Jagoi gi Lamda: Guru Thiyam Tarunkumar gi Khudol*, “Most importantly, Pabung Akebisana and Tarunkumar served as Amubi's assistant. Tarunkumar's role in helping the new compositions of Amubi and teaching the minute details of the dance was extremely significant” (Danisana 12). This observation underscores Tarunkumar's deep engagement with the aesthetic and technical reconstruction of Manipuri dance, revealing his mastery over bodily grammar, rhythmic nuance, and performative precision.

Similarly, Devjani Chaliha's recollection further illuminates his multidimensional persona: “I also met Dada Tarunkumar who assisted Guruji in his teaching and who was to become my friend, philosopher and guide” (Chaliha qtd. in Nongmai Pandit 12). Such testimonies highlight Tarunkumar's role not only as a teacher but also as a philosophical mentor and cultural guide—an embodiment of the *guru-shishya parampara*, where transmission extends beyond technique to encompass moral discipline, aesthetic sensibility, and spiritual orientation.

Richard Schechner's concept of restored behavior provides a productive theoretical lens for understanding Tarunkumar's position within this lineage. Schechner describes restored behavior as “living behavior treated as a film director treats a strip of film... rearranged or reconstructed independent of the causal systems that brought them into existence” (Schechner 35). Tarunkumar's artistic practice exemplifies this principle: he inherited codified movement vocabularies from Guru Amubi, internalized them through rigorous embodied training, and subsequently reconfigured them for institutional, theatrical, and pedagogic contexts without compromising their devotional essence.

Thus, Tarunkumar emerges as a critical intermediary figure—one who preserved the structural integrity of traditional Manipuri dance while simultaneously adapting it for modern audiences and expanding its reach beyond Manipur. His work demonstrates how lineage, embodiment, and innovation intersect within the evolving poetics of Manipuri performance.

Discipline and Pedagogy

One of the most defining dimensions of Guru Thiyam Tarunkumar's artistic persona was his uncompromising commitment to discipline. Known for his strictness, resilience, seriousness of purpose, and pursuit of perfection, he cultivated an environment where precision was non-negotiable. Although students often perceived him as intimidating, this intensity stemmed not from authoritarian temperament but from a profound dedication to artistic purity and the ethical rigor of the *guru-shishya* tradition. His pedagogy was grounded in the belief that excellence in Manipuri dance could emerge only through disciplined embodiment rather than superficial imitation.

Tarunkumar's pedagogic methods were systematic, structured, and remarkably scientific. Before introducing formal dance sequences, he trained students through foundational exercises, *pung* bols, gestural drills, jumps, swirling techniques, and coordinated left-right bodily movements. These preparatory practices reveal his understanding of dance as an embodied discipline, where the body becomes both the site and instrument of cultural knowledge. His approach aligns closely with Richard Schechner's assertion that performance training transforms the body into a repository of disciplined repetition. Schechner notes that "*performers are not only doing actions but training and rehearsing actions until those actions become embodied knowledge and restored performance*" (Schechner 37).

Tarunkumar's pedagogy exemplified this process of embodiment. Through rigorous repetition, dancers internalized not only technique but also the cultural memory embedded within Manipuri dance. His strictness extended beyond physical training to encompass moral and ethical expectations. He demanded sincerity, loyalty, humility, and disciplined conduct from his students—values he applied equally to his own family.

His personal life further mirrored this aesthetic discipline. Known for his immaculate appearance—neatly ironed *dhoti* and *kurta*, polished shoes, and an elegantly draped scarf—Tarunkumar embodied the principle that the artist's body is itself a performative extension of order, dignity, and self-respect. His everyday comportment thus became an enactment of the same aesthetic values he imparted in the dance studio, reinforcing the inseparability of discipline, embodiment, and artistic excellence.

Guru Tarunkumar and the Outward Expansion of Manipuri Dance

Guru Thiyam Tarunkumar played a pivotal role in extending the reach of Manipuri dance beyond the geographical and cultural boundaries of Manipur. Beginning in 1938, his solo performances, choreographic works, and drumming presentations were showcased across India and internationally, including in Sri Lanka, Russia, and Egypt. His artistic mobility marked a significant phase in the outward expansion of Manipuri dance, positioning him as one of the earliest cultural ambassadors of the tradition.

The dissemination of Manipuri dance outside Manipur had begun earlier during the reign of Maharaja Churachand, most notably with the historic performance of Manipuri Ras Lila in Kolkata in 1920 before Prince Albert. Subsequently, institutions such as Kala Bhavan and Nrityashram played crucial roles in promoting Manipuri dance across India. Within this broader movement of cultural circulation, Guru Tarunkumar emerged as a central figure, contributing substantially to the visibility and recognition of Manipuri dance in metropolitan and international cultural circuits.

In 1942, Tarunkumar joined Bombay Talkies under the leadership of Devika Rani as Director of Dance, earning a monthly salary of five hundred rupees—a considerable amount for the period. His association with Bombay Talkies not only reflects his artistic stature but also demonstrates the integration of Manipuri dance into wider Indian cinematic and cultural networks.

During the Second World War, Tarunkumar established the Tarunkumar Dance Academy in Lahore, which stands as one of the earliest dance institutions founded by a Manipuri artist outside Manipur. This institutional initiative exemplifies the mechanisms of cultural transmission, wherein embodied knowledge travels across regions through pedagogic structures, performance networks, and institutional frameworks. Cultural Transmission Theory is particularly relevant here, as Tarunkumar functioned as a transmitter of Manipuri cultural identity, adapting the tradition for diverse audiences while maintaining its devotional and aesthetic integrity.

His collaboration with Horen Ghosh further expanded his artistic exposure. Recognizing Tarunkumar's exceptional talent, Ghosh organized performances across Bengal and Assam, enabling Manipuri dance to reach audiences far beyond its ritual-sacred homeland. Through these journeys, Tarunkumar contributed to the transformation of Manipuri dance from a regionally embedded practice into a nationally and internationally recognized performance tradition.

Theatrical Evolution in Tarunkumar's Choreography

Guru Thiyam Tarunkumar's contribution as a choreographer constitutes a significant chapter in the evolution of Manipuri dance, particularly in its transition from ritual-sacred contexts to theatrical and institutional performance cultures. His choreographic oeuvre includes major dance-dramas such as *Draupadi Swayambar*, *Chitrangada*, *Naga Duyet*, *Ye Sakhi*, and *Krishna Tandav*, each of which demonstrates his capacity to synthesize devotional aesthetics with dramaturgical sophistication. These works reveal a choreographer who was deeply rooted in the spiritual ethos of Manipuri dance yet fully conversant with the demands of theatrical presentation and narrative clarity.

Richard Schechner's Performance Theory provides a productive framework for understanding Tarunkumar's choreographic practice. Schechner conceptualizes choreography as a form of restored behavior—a reconstruction of culturally inherited actions adapted for new performative situations. Tarunkumar's work exemplifies this principle: he preserved the devotional core of Manipuri dance while expanding its expressive and theatrical possibilities for diverse audiences. His celebrated duet performances with Bilashini Devi, marked by synchronized precision, emotional resonance, and aesthetic refinement, illustrate his ability to translate spiritual softness into performative elegance. These duets became emblematic of the lyrical and devotional sensibility that characterizes Manipuri dance.

Following his association with the Jawaharlal Nehru Manipur Dance Academy (JNMDA), Tarunkumar composed notable ballad-based choreographies such as *Nongdon Leima* and *Sarik Makhol*. These compositions enriched the institutional repertoire and contributed to the development of a modern performance culture within Manipuri dance. Through such works, he played a crucial role in shaping the aesthetic vocabulary of twentieth-century Manipuri choreography, bridging ritual tradition with theatrical innovation.

Tarunkumar's choreographic legacy thus reflects a dynamic interplay between embodied tradition, creative reconstruction, and institutional performance practice. His work demonstrates how Manipuri dance could retain its devotional essence while simultaneously evolving into a sophisticated theatrical art form capable of engaging contemporary audiences across cultural contexts.

Tarunkumar's Institutional and Preservationist Contributions

Guru Thiyam Tarunkumar's role in institutional development constitutes a crucial dimension of his legacy within the history of Manipuri dance. His long tenure at the Jawaharlal Nehru Manipur Dance Academy (JNMDA) enabled him to train multiple generations of dancers within a structured pedagogic environment, thereby ensuring the systematic transmission of Manipuri dance through formalized educational frameworks. His institutional presence helped consolidate Manipuri dance as both a classical art form and an academic discipline.

During his period in Nabadwip, Tarunkumar established the Rajarshi Bhagyachandra Nritya Kala Mandir, further extending the institutional footprint of Manipuri dance outside Manipur. His engagement as a visiting teacher at Uday Shankar's institution, where he taught twice a week, situates him within the broader Indian dance revival movements of the mid-twentieth century. These interactions reveal his active

participation in shaping a pan-Indian discourse on classical and modern dance, while simultaneously asserting the distinctiveness of Manipuri performance traditions.

In 1979, Tarunkumar founded PAL (Progressive Artist Laboratory) in Manipur, reinforcing his commitment to dance education and cultural preservation. His written work, *Manipur Nritya Praveshika*, remains a significant contribution to the field, particularly given the historical scarcity of written documentation on Manipuri dance. The text represents an important attempt to codify embodied knowledge, transforming oral and performative traditions into archival material accessible to future scholars and practitioners.

The marginalization of many Manipuri gurus within academic scholarship continues to pose a serious challenge to the preservation of the region's intangible cultural heritage. Much of the knowledge associated with Manipuri dance survives through oral transmission, embodied practice, and lineage-based pedagogy. Tarunkumar's life and work underscore the urgent need for systematic archival preservation, scholarly documentation, and critical historiography to safeguard Manipuri dance traditions for future generations. His institutional initiatives and textual contributions exemplify how individual agency can play a transformative role in sustaining cultural memory across time and space.

Conclusion

Guru Thiyam Tarunkumar Singh occupies a foundational and enduring position in the cultural and performative history of twentieth-century Manipuri dance. His multifaceted contributions—as performer, choreographer, pedagogue, institution builder, and cultural ambassador—played a decisive role in shaping both the development and the wider dissemination of Manipuri dance within India and across international contexts. Through the analytical lens of Performance Theory, Tarunkumar's artistic practice emerges as a dynamic process of *restored behavior*, wherein traditional cultural memory was preserved, re-embodied, and reconstructed through disciplined repetition and performative adaptation.

Complementing this, Cultural Transmission Theory illuminates his role in sustaining Manipuri dance across generations and geographical boundaries. His systematic pedagogy, institutional initiatives, and unwavering commitment to devotional aesthetics ensured that Manipuri dance could evolve as both a sacred practice and a modern theatrical art form. His rigorous discipline, philosophical depth, and creative innovation collectively contributed to the transformation of Manipuri dance into a culturally resonant and pedagogically structured performance tradition.

Despite the magnitude of his contributions, Tarunkumar remains comparatively underrepresented within mainstream academic scholarship. Much of his legacy survives through oral narratives, embodied memory, disciples, and institutional practices rather than through formal documentation. This study therefore underscores the urgent need for sustained archival preservation, critical historiography, and scholarly engagement with Manipuri gurus whose work continues to shape the cultural identity and artistic continuity of Manipur.

In essence, Guru Thiyam Tarunkumar stands not merely as a dance teacher but as a custodian of Manipuri cultural heritage—a guardian of embodied knowledge whose artistic vision, pedagogic discipline, and cultural stewardship continue to inspire future generations and enrich the evolving poetics of Manipuri performance.

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