

MANIPURI DANCING

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Bordering the north east corner of India enclaved by the mountain ranges, between Assam and Burma, lies the tiny state of Manipur. The Bamboo thickets and banana groves dotted by placid lakes and innumerable temples make it truly an abode of Gods. Since days bygone, in nature's beauty and bounty, the people of Manipur have cultivated a life merged in music and dancing. They have celebration of social functions having ceremonies like birth of a child, annaprasan (i.e. giving food for the first time to a child), Karnabhed (piercing the ears) upanayan (tread ceremony) marriage and death in which they dance and sing. Truly they believe themselves to be the descendents of Gandharvas (the celestial musicians and dancers). This belief in the ancient myth and legend is a guiding and preserving force of the noble heritage of the art of Manipuri dancing in its pristine purity. These dance and music are associated with religion, thereby enabling men to commune with God and feel harmonious with nature.

They have ancient animistic religion worshipping village gods, household deities and ancestral worship. During the festival of Laiharaoba i.e. merry making of Gods, Maibis, the priestesses worship village Gods (umanglei) and describe the primitive concept of cosmology through dance. They describe creation of earth (Leisem Jagoi), human being and his different activities like building the house, weaving the cloth, fishing etc. (Laibou jagoi) In this festival they also have dances of the legendary lovers Khamba and Thoibi as well as story of Nongpokning thou and Panthoibi (incarnation of Shiva and Parvati) in the form of a dance drama - On the last day of the festival the Maibis while dancing, go in trance and imbibe the spirit of goddess and they achieve powers to predict future events.

Initiated by Maharaja Bhagyachandra in 1764 the people of Manipur adopted Gaudiya Vaisnavism, the cult of devotion as advocated by Lord Chaitanya Mahaprabhu - which influenced all the social and religious celebrations having appropriate dance forms with the theme of divine love of Lord Krishna and Radha and the childhood pranks of young Krishna.

There are innumerable Gurus specialised in different aspects of dance and music. They have developed their own style of dancing, tala and music. They have been continuously and creatively contributing towards the storehouse of dance movements, talas and rhythm patterns. The great source of inspiration for this has been Vaisnavite shastras on dance and music such as Govindaleelamritam, Bhaktiratnakar, Anandavrinndavanchampu, Ujjwala nilamani and many others as well as the manuscripts available in Manipur.

Manipur has got variety of dance forms - Tribal, folk, traditional and classical dances - out of these Rasleelas and Sankirtan are the most highly developed forms of dance and music expressing the deep religious feelings of the people of Manipur.

Dramatic potentialities are skilfully exploited in these Rasleelas (the dance dramas.) All the forms of dance namely solo, duet group, opera, pantomime etc. are incorporated in Rasleelas, Rasleelas also have all the technical elements found in the Shastras.

There are six Rasleelas performed at different occasions, Maharas on the full moon night of Kartik,

Vasantas on the full moon night of Chaitra, Kunjras on full moon night of Ashwin, Nityaras performed at any occasion, Gopras (Gostha or Rakhil Ras) on 8th day of Kartik and Udukhel Ras in the month of Kartik. The first four depict the Krishna's amorous play with Radha and Gopis and other two depict the childhood pranks and adventures of Lord Krishna.

These Rasleelas are performed in the Nat Mandap (dancing Hall) in front of the temple. In Manipur every temple has a Nat Mandapa and every locality of village has a temple. They have a traditional code specifying definite rules and regulations with regard to the dimension of the auditorium, decor and the arrangement of seats according to social status. These Rasleelas go on for 8 to 10 hours from dusk to dawn and the devotional people of Manipur sit through these performances and shed tears of joy experiencing spiritual bliss – Rasleelas have a metaphysical meaning Krishna represent the Supreme soul and Gopas and Gopis the individual souls. The individual souls yearn to become one with the supreme soul. Apart from Rasleelas, Sankirtan has an equally significant importance in the art and life of Manipur. Sankirtan, Community prayer and an invocation of God, became an extremely important religious expression. Manipur has evolved a most exquisite Sankirtan by incorporating Manipuri's most difficult and highly evolved dance forms such as Kartal Cholom (cymbal dance) and Pung Cholom (drum dance). Sankirtan or Natpala follows a very strict code in its performance. It has a predetermined ritualistic preliminaries. Sankirtan is performed at various festivals and religious and social occasions. It is also performed as prologue before Rasleelas.

Other dance forms utilised in various festivals are Khubakishai i.e. clap dance by men and women in Rathayatra festival, cymbal dance in Julan Yatra festival, dances with dhol, dafat Aogonad, Dholak in Holi festival and dances with sword and spear in Durga Puja.

The distinguishing trait of Manipuri dancing is an expression entirely through body movements. A delicate balance is achieved between the movements of the different parts of the body rejecting emphasis on any one part. The movements are rounded, lyrical, continuous, mingling into each other like the waves of the sea. The movements are executed diagonally. The swaying of the torso, and the vertical up and down movements of the body is very important. The eyes and head follow the movements of the arms.

Manipuri dancing is distinctly divided into two main types Lasya, the feminine which is delicate and graceful and Tandava, the masculine, which is forceful and virile...

Mridang is the soul of Manipuri Dancing. Manipur has evolved innumerable talas ranging from 4 to 68 beats. All the rich treasure of time measures, and its intricate play in a variety of laya that is to say, rhythm and rhythm. patterns created by drum is really the dance – Manipuri Guru have developed their own system of tala, taking inspiration from the vaisnavite shastras on music.

Abhinaya or the histrionic representation is an important aspect of Manipuri dancing. Ancient texts for the purpose of Abhinaya, have all the human emotions codified into 9 distinct categories of sentiments. In Manipur, Shringara the sentiment of love predominates and all other 8 sentiments (Rasas) become integral entities of the supreme sentiment of love. Vaisnavite preach the philosophy of universal love through the love of Radha and Krishna. Through the manifestations of all the human emotions, ultimately, the highest sentiment of love is to be realised.



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In manipuri dance abhinaya is subdued, dignified, subtle and natural. The use of 26 single hand gestures and 12 double hand gestures is employed in a suggestive way.

Over and above the knowledge of scientific tenets according to various shastras on dancing, the dancer is expected to have a keen psychological and aesthetic understanding and sensitivity for interpreting and expressing the exact state of the sentiment.

Music in Manipur plays essentially a complimentary role to its dancing. Though it is influenced by north and south Indian music, it has its own individuality as the manipulation of the microtones of the notes create a peculiarly different effect.

Songs of the devotional poets like Jayadev, Vidyapati, Chandidas, Gyandas, Narottamdas and others are sung in sanskrit, old Bengali, Brajbuli, Meithili and recently manipuri.

Costume, ornaments, and make up are evolved to enhance the particular dance form suitable to the nature and spirit of the social and religious occasions. These contribute to the achievement of the purpose of dancing of communicating and representing particular Rasa and Bhava.

From generation to generation dancing in Manipur has been fulfilling its function to the fullest in relation to both the individual and the Society. To the individual it has offered spirituality and to the society, a sense of solidarity through purest delight.
