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MANIPURI IDENTITY IN TRIPURA THROUGH DANCE AND MUSIC: THE PILLAR OF SOCIETY IN THE PAST

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ABSTRACT

Manipuri in Tripura has maintained a distinct cultural identity through its dance and music. It serves not only a medium of artistic expression but also as a conduit for retaining linguistic, spiritual and social tradition. Tripura and Manipur have shared close connection since ancient times in terms of war, diplomacy and trade. The matrimonial alliances of Manipuri with the royal house of Tripura gave huge impact on the socio-cultural life of Tripura, predominantly in the palace. The historical settlement of Manipuri in Tripura was also occurred due to matrimonial alliance in 1798 AD. Since then, the Manipuri culture particularly dance and music played a vital role in portraying the vibrant culture and identity of Manipuri in Tripura. Dance and music like Ra dance, folk dance such as Lai Haraoba, Sankritan, Khubakesei etc. remained an important aspect that represent the cultural identity of Manipuri which also created an unbreakable bond with the royal house of Tripura. The cultural forms reflect Manipuri's deep connection to its roots, mythology and history and are instrumental in fostering a sense of belonging and continuity among the younger generations. This paper attempts to highlight the mechanisms by which dance and music contribute to the preservation of cultural identity among Manipuri in Tripura. It aims to focus on their role in community cohesion, intergenerational transmission of tradition and the efforts of artists in safeguarding these practices. It shall also depict the influence made by the culture of Manipuri in the socio-cultural life of Tripura.

KEYWORDS: Manipuri, Tripura, Dance, Music, Culture

INTRODUCTION:

Dance and music have a significant role in fostering harmony and reflecting our shared identity. It also offers chances for cultural exchange and social engagement, uniting individuals from different origins in common artistic endeavours.ⁱ The ages long interaction between Manipur and Tripura developed a closed bond in the field of culture, diplomacy and trade. The early contact of Manipur and Tripura was traced back since 5th century AD when Taidakshin was the king of Tripura. He married Mekhali princess and had a son called Sutaksin.ⁱⁱ However, the details of the event could not be traced. Evident from number of historical sources, Manipuri culture particularly dance and music began to ingrained in the society of Tripura when princess Harisheswori, the daughter of King Bhagyachandra married Rajdhar Manikya II, the king of Tripura in 1798 AD. Princess Harisheswori brought with her Radhamadav idol as her personal worshipping God when she married Rajdhar Manikya in 1798 AD.ⁱⁱⁱ Afterwards, the performance of Ras Leela, a popular dance of Manipur was begun in Tripura under the instruction of Princess Harisheswori.^{iv} Manipuris are known as *Mekhali* by the Tripuri people and Tripuri are called *Takhel* by the Manipuri. This paper shall contribute in understanding the role of dance and music in preserving the identity of Manipuri in Tripura. It shall also discuss the influence of *gurus* in popularising the Manipuri culture which is important in securing the identity.

Manipuri began to migrated and settled in Tripura as a result of push factors that included court intrigues, political turmoil and voluntary factors like matrimonial alliances among the kingdoms. L. Biramangal Singh, in his work *Takhelda Manipuri* also mentioned that the son of Garibniwaz, Ajit Sai (Chit Sai) along with his assistant came to Tripura to seek the help of King Krishna Manikya of Tripura (1760-1783 AD) in regaining the throne of Manipur. He further noted that the followers of Ajit Sai (Chit Sai) settled in places such as Kashba and Sonamura sub-division i.e., Nalchhara, Khedabari, Tokchhapara etc.^v N. Tarunkumar Singh in *Manipur Past and Present Vol IV* narrated the first Meitei settlement in Tripura based on royal matrimony was established during the period of Maharaja Bhagyachandra. He gave the hand of his daughter Rajmala (Sija Tampha) to Krishna Manikya (1748-1783), the King of Tripura. She became the chief queen and ruled Tripura for two years after her husband, the King died in 1783.^{vi} She built the Panchratna temple and installed a deity of Radhamadhaba at Radhanagar of Noor Nagar Pargana which is currently located in Bangladesh.^{vii} The most significant matrimonial relation that occurred between the royal house of Tripura and Manipur was happened in 1798 A.D. during the period of Bhagyachandra, the King of Manipur and Rajdhar Manikya (1785-1804), the King of Tripura. Bhagyachandra, on his way to Nabadwip for a pilgrimage gave the hand of his daughter Princess Harisheswori to the King of Tripura, Rajdhar Manikya II.^{viii} The princess was accompanied by a number of followers who remained settled with her in Tripura. Sarungbam, Hanjabam, Khumanthem, and Laipubam were notable households who came as retinues of the princess and made a permanent settlement in Agartala.^{ix} Another major incident that led to the migration of Manipuri in Tripura was the Burmese invasion of 1819 which lasted for

seven years. The exact number of Manipuri who arrived in Tripura due to Burmese havoc is hard to trace. Soibam Suresh Kumar in his work *Takhenda Meitei Khuntaba* stated that the precise number of individuals who entered Tripura during Awa Lan (Burmese war) is unknown but more than 10,000 Manipuri were believed to be migrated to Tripura.^x

Dance and music were very popular among the Manipuri in Tripura. It played an important role in preserving the identity of Manipuri in Tripura. It is used not only as a part of festival but also in the various ceremonies such as religious purpose, wedding and death rituals. The dance of Manipuris may be categorised into folk dances and Classical dance. The former included *Lai haraobajagoi*, *Khamba thoibijagoi*, *ThabalChongba* and the later included *Ras jagoi*, *Jhulonjagoi*:

- a) Folk Dance: The customs and traditions of various regions and ethnic groups are profoundly ingrained in folk dances. It provides important insights into a community's way of life by reflecting its everyday activities, customs, and festivities.^{xi} Folk dances help to preserve a community's collective memory. These dances illustrate mythological tales, narrate historical events bridging the gap between the past, present, and future by becoming an essential component of a community's story.^{xii} In Tripura, folk dances are performed in various festivals and ceremonies like *Lai haraoba* and *Yaoshang*. *Lai Haraoba* is one of the most significant traditional festivals in Meitei culture that is celebrated to honour the gods and goddesses.^{xiii} The literal meaning of *Lai Haraoba* is “pleasing the god” and the central purpose of the ritual is to invoke the presence of the lai so as to appease him through sacred performance. It is regarded as the most authentic Meitei traditional festivals that preserved the ancient Manipuri culture.^{xiv} According to N. Pramodini Devi (2011), in *Lai Haraoba*, the *Maibas* (priests), *Pena* singer, *Maibis* (priestess) and *Laisangbas* (guardian of the deity) played central role in its rituals. *Lai Haraoba* served as a cultural institution, where its rituals, practices and communal aspects were deeply embedded in the beliefs and traditions of the Meitei people.^{xv} In the *Lai Haroba* religious festival, certain dances and music were performed which signify the creation of the earth (*LeisemJagoi*), formation of human body (*hakchangsa*), building of the house (*Yumsarol*), prosperity of the whole community accompanied by a romantic song sung by the maibi and penakhongba refers to the love of the mythical hero Nongpok Ningthou for his spouse Panthoibi (*PanthoibiJagoi*), preparation of cloth and offering it to the deities (*PhisarolJagoi*), gathering the soul of the deities (*LongkholJagoi*) etc.^{xvi} The *Lai haraoba* festival was introduced by Maharani Rajeshwori at *Lainingthou Pakhangba* temple in Banamalipur which was built by her son Maharaja Radha Kishore Manikya.^{xvii} The *Lai Haraoba* of *Pakhangba* was occurred in the month of January which last for 4 days.^{xviii} This occasion has evolved into an intriguing example of intercultural coexistence. On this occasion the Ramayana Kirtan, Nimai Sannyas Pala, Bhagavada recitation, Nupipala and Mandila Pala, and other events were organised.^{xix} The *ThabalChongba*, a type of Manipuri folk dance is celebrated by boys and girls holding hands and

dancing in circle. It is usually performed in association with the festival of *Yaoshang*.^{xx} Saroj Nalini Parratt (2013) asserted that the Thabalchongba dance might have been originally a spring dance.^{xxi}

Figure.1: Laibou Jagoi in Puthiba Lai Haraoba at Abhoynagar, Tripura



b) Classical Dance: When Princess Hariseshwori married Rajdhar Manikya in 1798 AD, she brought with her Radhamadav idol as her personal worshipping God.^{xxii} Afterwards, the performance of Ras Leela, a popular dance of Manipur was begun in Tripura under the instruction of Princess Harisheswori.^{xxiii} The area of where Ras lila performed was regarded as very sacred so strict regulation is maintained around the area. Ras Mandap was allowed to be entered only by the Manipuris Hindu while other has to stand outside the pandal.^{xxiv} Manipuri dance and music was popularised in Tripura under the royal patronage which was influence by Manipuri queens in the royal house of Tripura. The costumes of Raas Lila were sponsored by the royal house. For instances, Birchandra Manikya brought the Ras costumes, Mandilas and Kartal from Imphal, Manipur for the performance of Raas Lila at Radhamadhab.^{xxv} Manipuri Basanta Ras and Holi Kirtana catch the eye of Mahakavi leading to the introduction of the dance in his newly established institution called Brahmailydia at Santiniketan. To teach the Manipuri dance, Rajkumar Budhimant was sent to Santinikentan as a dance teacher in 1919 by king Birendra Kishore Manikya.^{xxvi} The Manipuri dance and music was learnt and performed by the members of royal family and the Thakurloks who were also took part



Figure.2: Ras Lila at Radhamadhab Temple (courtesy: Tripura star News)

in dance performances. Another classical dance form of Manipur that is popular in Tripura is Jhulonjagoi. According to W. Biramangal, JhulonJagoi was began to performed in Tripura during the reign of Bir Chandra Manikya in 1872 AD in the royal palace. All the performer including the dancer, drummer were women. The first guru who taught Jhulonjagoi in Tripura was believed to be Moirangthem Oja Bhabuni.^{xxvii}



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**JhulonJagoi at Radhamadav Temple (Courtesy:
 Ujjayanta Palace Museum**

Regarding music, performances of *Kirtan*, *Khubakesei*, *Kartal pala* were performed in a festival like Holi, *Kang* (Rath Yatra) since the olden days. There was *Pala* group for performing *pungesei* with *ojas* in every village.^{xxviii} Another form of Nata Sankirtan called *Maha dhumel* was also performed in Tripura. The *Kirtan* group of the royal palaces were known as *Ningthem Pala* founded by Radha Kishore Manikya.^{xxix} On numerous occasions, Manipuri performed dances and *Kirtan* singing Harinam or Krishna lila in royal palace and community hall or *Nat Mandap* using musical instrument like large cymbals and tabours.^{xxx} The song was sung in old Bengali, Brajabuli, Sanskrit and rarely in Manipuri.^{xxxi} But due to the shortage of income and difficult in maintaining the livelihood, the profession as a *pung-eseioja* had been reduced. Now a days, *pung-eseioja* are hired from the Cachar and Manipur to performed big *Kirtan*.^{xxxii} Various instrument has been used for the purpose of dance and music i.e., *pung*, *pena*, *Dhol*, *kartal*, *bangshi*, *israj*, *moibungetc*.^{xxxiii}



Figure. 4: Ningthem Pala at Tripura Palace.

Manipuri dance and music was popularised in Tripura and across India with the help of Gurus or *Ojas*. Under their instruction, the native Tripuri used to organise *Raslila* in their villages.^{xxxiv} For instance, tribal community of Tripura played Ras Lila in their village under the instruction of SapamKonungjao.^{xxxv} This has been regarded as an important step to secure and popularised the identity of Manipuri in Tripura. These gurus and *ojas* developed Manipuri dance and song in new styles and genres in Tripura.^{xxxvi} Some notable dance guru or *Ojas* were RK Jitendrajit, who was popularly known as SanakhyaNitaipada Sana, Thakur Pangambam Nabakumar, Pangambam Kumudh, ThangjamAngoutombi, Sapam Konungjao, Chandrajit Singh. Manipur Sangit Nityashram was established at Abhoynagar to spread the Manipuri *Pung, esei* and *Jagoi*.^{xxxvii} Mesmerize by the vibrant beauty of Manipuri Ras dance, Rabindranath Tagore asked Tripura king Birendrakishore Manikya to send one *Jagoi* or dance teacher to taught *Meitei Jagoi* in Santiniketan and Angousana (Rajkumar Budhimant) was sent in 1919 AD.^{xxxviii} The Dance of Manipur was popularised under the patronage of Tripura's King and occasionally performed in the royal house which was later gradually developed the *Agartala Gharana* or school of Manipuri dance and number of talented *Ojas* or Guru were produced.^{xxxix} Even after the Maharajas of Tripura stopped patronizing the Manipuri artistes, the ordinary people, including the artists themselves, tried to keep their culture and traditions alive even though they had to face tremendous hardship.^{xl}

CONCLUSION

Dance and music play a crucial role in preserving the cultural identity of Manipur. Both arts forms serve as expressions of the history, spirituality, social traditions of Manipuri which help in maintaining and transmitting its distinct identity across generations. The two categories of Manipuri dance and music such as Folk dances and Classical dance highlight the vibrant cultural heritage of Manipuri and their capabilities of balancing them in the society. Manipuri in Tripura helped in spreading Ras dance across India with the help of Rabindranath Tagore. In Tripura, dance and music remains a pillar of identity for Manipuri which bind the community together and reaffirm their shared cultural identity. Manipuri music, particularly folk music played an important role in preserving the indigenous language, dialect and oral traditions among the Manipuri in Tripura. It also links the age long tradition and custom which Manipur

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