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TRADITIONAL DANCE AND MUSIC AS A PILLAR OF MANIPURIS IDENTITY IN TRIPURA: CULTURAL AND SOCIAL SIGNIFICANCE

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ABSTRACT

Manipuri in Tripura has maintained a distinct cultural identity through its dance and music. It serves not only as a medium of artistic expression but also as a conduit for retaining linguistic, spiritual and social traditions. The Manipuri culture particularly dance and music played a vital role in portraying the vibrant culture and identity of Manipuri in Tripura. Classical Dance like Ras dance and folk dance such as Lai Haraoba as well as music such as 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. These 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 made humble attempt to highlight the mechanisms by which dance and music contribute to the preservation of cultural identity among Manipuris in Tripura. It aims to focus on their role in community cohesion, intergenerational transmission of tradition and the efforts of an artists in safeguarding these practices.

KEYWORDS: Manipuri, Tripura, Dance, Music, Culture

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REVIEW OF LITERATURE:

For the re-examining of the concerned subject, number of literatures have been consulted that highlighted dance and music played an important part in the formation of cultural identity of Manipuris (Meitei) in the diasporic settings particularly in Tripura. Manipur Past and Present Volume IV edited by Naorem Sanajaob provided valuable information about the migration and socio-cultural life of Manipuris who has been living outside Manipur including Tripura. In this edited volume, R. K. Jitendrajit Singh stated in his chapter *The Cultural Life of Manipuris in Tripura* (2005) the cultural practices of Manipuris in Tripura emphasizing that classical dance like *Ras Lila*, *Kirtan*, *Khubak Ishei* and *Kartal Pala* played a major role in preserving community identity and social values. He also highlighted the notion that cultural festivals and devotional performances strengthened unity among the Manipuris settled in Tripura. Wangkhem Biramangal (2016) in his works *Takhengi Puwarida Manipuri* highlighted about the beginning of the performance of *Ras Lila* under the patronage of Princess Hariseshwori in 1798 AD and beginning of showcasing *Jhulon Jagoid* during the reign of Bir Chandra Manikya in 1872 AD has been important facade of Manipuri cultural identity supported by royal house in Tripura. The role of Manipuri *ojas* and *gurus* in spreading Manipuris dance and music across different part of Tripura is also meticulously discussed by Wangkhem Biramangal (2016). R.K. Kamaljit Singh (2015) in *Tripurahi Meihourola Meitei* comprehensively examined the history of Manipuri settlement in Tripura. He shows that Manipuri preserved their socio-cultural identity through festivals, dance, music and devotional performances in Tripura. His work also describes the influence of Manipuri queens in royal house of Tripura in popularising and preserving Manipuris cultural practices in their native places by building temple attached with mandap for the purpose of community. Soibam Suresh Kumar (2019) in *Takhenda Meitei Khuntaba* discussed about the establishment of Meitei settlements in Tripura and highlighted the importance of cultural gatherings, festivals and performing arts in maintaining social solidarity and preserving ethnic identity among the Manipuris. U. Adhikari (2017) in *Socio-cultural Relations Among States in pre-Independence India: A Study of Tripura and Manipur* examined the historical socio-cultural relations between Tripura and Manipur before India's independence by explaining how political relations, royal marriages and religious interactions contributed to the spread of Manipuri dance, music, and Vaishnavite traditions in Tripura. Rajkumar B.S. in Prof N Tombi Singh *Confluence: Essay on Manipuri Literature and Culture* mentioned about the popularisation of Manipuris *Ras Lila* under Manipuri *gurus* and its introduction at the Santiniketan by Rabindranath Tagore. The reviewed literature collectively demonstrates that dance and music have served as powerful socio-cultural tools among the Manipuris in

Tripura. However, there remains limited work specifically focusing on dance and music as instruments of socio-cultural transformation, identity formation, and intercultural interaction among the Manipuris in Tripura which therefore, the present study seeks to fill this research gap.

METHODOLOGY

The methodological used in this paper is inter-disciplinary **approach** that employed social anthropological and historical methods utilising both primary and secondary data. An interview of knowledgeable person is also conducted as an important methodology and interaction with community members, including elders, dance and music *ojas*, religious practitioners and participants involved in the festivals and ritual performances is made to gather firsthand accounts of the concerned topic. In addition to this, secondary data are obtained from books, journal articles and unpublished thesis related to Manipuri culture, artistic performance, temple architecture and ritual practices.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

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 Hariseshwori, the daughter of King Bhagyachandra married Rajdhar Manikya II, the king of Tripura in 1798 AD. Princess Hariseshwori brought with her Radhamadav idol as her personal worshipping God when she married Rajdhar Manikya in 1798 AD.ⁱⁱⁱ Afterwards, the performance of Ras Lila, 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.

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.^vN. 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 Baghyachandra. 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 When they migrated in Tripura, the Manipuris along with them brought the socio-cultural practices which was prevalent in pre-seven years devastation Manipur where dance and music played an important part in the society of that period.

Dance and music were very popular among the Manipuri in Tripura which also 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 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 Haraoba* festival, certain dances and music were performed which signify the creation of the earth (*Leisem Jagoi*), 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 at the *Lainingthou Pakhangba* temple at Math Chowmuhan.^{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} Additionally, *Lai haraoba* of *Lainingthou Puthibais* also conducted every year at the *laibung* located in Abhoynagar and the Manipuri folk dance like *Leishem Jagoi* etc. has been showcasing at this time. Besides, the *Thabal Chongba*, 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}

The beginning of the performance of popular Manipuri classical dance *Ras Lila* was happened under the instruction of Princess Hariseshwori in front of the Radhamadav idol which she brought as her personal worshipping God when she married Rajdhar Manikya in 1798 AD.^{xxii} 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 Manipuri Hindu while other has to stand outside the pandal.^{xxiii} Manipuri dance and music was popularised in Tripura under the royal patronage which was influenced by Manipuri queens in the royal house of Tripura. The costumes of *Ras Lila* were sponsored by the royal house. For instances, Bir Chandra Manikya brought the *Ras* costumes, *Mandilas* and *Kartal* from Imphal, Manipur for the performance of *Ras Lila* at Radhamadhab temple.^{xxiv} Manipuri *Basanta Ras* catch the eye of Vishwakavi Rabindranath Tagore when he visited Agartala during the reign of King Radha Kishore Manikya (1897-1909 AD) in 1899 AD. In another visit, Manipuri *Ras Lila* was again watched by Vishwakavi along with Maharajkumar Brajendra Kishore (Son of King Birendra Kishore Manikya) at the royal palace of Tripura and give remark of the dance as “Having seen this dance, my visit in purbhanga (the then East Bengal) has become fruitful, rather fulfilled” as quoted in the *Prof. N Tombi Singh Confluence: Essays on Manipuri Literature and Culture*. Following that experience, Viswakavi wrote a letter to Maharajkumar Brajendra Kishore for requesting to send Manipuri dance teacher to teach *Ras* dance at Santiniketan and in 1919 during the reign of King Birendra Kishore Manikya (1909-1923 AD) Rajkumar Buddhimanta, Manipuri

dance *oja* was sent to by the king leading to the introduction of Manipuri dance in the cultural curricula of Vishwa Bharti.^{xxv}

Besides a person hailed from ordinary background, the Manipuri dance and music was learnt by the members of royal family and the Thakurloksand actively participated in dance performances which shows the popularity of Manipuri dances in the Tripura palace and highlighted the strong patronage extended by the royal family of Tripura. 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 as stated by W. Biramangal.^{xxvi}

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. *Kirtan* played an important part not only in festivals but also in life cycle ceremonies like marriage and death of Manipuris in Tripura. 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.^{xxvii} 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. The song was sung in old Bengali, Brajabuli, Sanskrit and rarely in Manipuri.^{xxviii} 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*.^{xxix} Various instrument has been used for the purpose of dance and music i.e., *pung, pena, Dhol, kartal, bangshi, israj, moibungetc.*^{xxx}

The dance and music of Manipuris are performed at Mandap which played an important part of showcasing cultural identity in Tripura. A *mandap* is a key architectural feature in Manipuri (Meitei) villages functioning as a pillared pavilion or hall where ritual performances particularly *sankirtan* (devotional singing and dancing), *Ras Lila* takes place. It serves as a semi-outdoor, square-shaped chamber designed for religious ceremonies, community gatherings and cultural festivals. Its design typically includes a layered roofing structure, emphasizing its significance as a focal point for sacred and communal activities. Both temples and *mandaps* are constructed by the local community^{xxxi} showcasing collective effort and shared responsibility. Mandap is more of like an institution which played huge role in the society of Manipur as most of the ceremony and gathering were performed here. Community based ceremonies such as *Khubakesei*, *Shradda karma* (death rituals), community gathering, performance of *Ras Lila*, *Jhulon* (introduced by Bir Chandra Manikya in Tripura), *Kirtan*, *Dhumen*, *Drama* were initiated in the Mandap.^{xxxii} It is also used by the children for centre of recital competition, older generation availed

it to played traditional games like *Kaang*, and women folk utilised it for a place of weaving. Moreover, it is a place where people learnt and discuss about their identity and social norms.^{xxxiii} The building of mandaps and mandirs which was rent free were initiated by the Manipuri queens in their native villages.^{xxxiv}

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 *Ras lila* in their villages.^{xxxv} For instance, tribal community of Tripura played Ras Lila in their village under the instruction of SapamKonungjao.^{xxxvi} 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.^{xxxvii} Some notable dance guru or *Ojas* were RK Jitendrajit, who was popularly known as SanakhyaNitaipada Sana, Thakur Pangambam Nabakumar, Pangambam Kumudh, ThangjamAngoutombi, SapamKonungjao, Chandrajit Singh. Manipur Sangit Nityashram was established at Abhoynagar to spread the Manipuri *Pung, esei* and *Jagoi*.^{xxxviii} 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.^{xxxix} 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.^{xl} 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.^{xli}

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 Manipuri in Tripura inherited from their homeland, Manipur.

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