

Literal Perspective of Raas Leela As An Indian Classical Dance

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ABSTRACT

Manipuri dance underwent several changes during the 20th century A.D. The British officers did very early know that tiny state called Manipur was having a magnificent object of traditional art called “Jagoi Rasa”. It is also quite certain that no Indian political leaders of new India would ignore the opinion of Rabindranath when they thought of reconstructing the Indian dance and music tradition by determining four Indian classical dances. Viswa Kavi Rabindranath Thakur and some other important Indians leaders endeavoured to have a healthy existence of Indian classical dances including our Manipuri dance also. It was the British officers only who really nurtured and nourished Indian culture. They really knew the value of culture and its usefulness to human society. As a result of a determined long struggle to free India from British colonial rule and to create a country called Bharatvarsha by uniting many princely states under the able leadership of Mahatma Gandhi together with Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru and Sardar Patel etc. India won freedom and an independent India was born. With this, India desired to reconstruct its old tradition including its own music and dance. Thus, in the development of the existence of age long tradition of its classical dances can be achieved and as a matter of fact that the present form of Manipuri Raas could also be placed in the priority of Indian classical dance.

Key words: Raas, Bharatvarsha, Boro Saheb, British, Sanatombi and Victoria.

Introduction

The 20th Century is especially a significant and valuable period of time for Manipur. This century is very important in the history of Manipur. During this time, not only in economic, social, political and educational aspects, there came a big change in other fields also, and many rare and historic events occurred during this time. Changing of culture with the change of society and changing of society with the change of culture are quite natural and it's a natural phenomenon.

Cultural changes

The British Government was fully well aware that Manipur had been a land inhabited together by the Manipuris and many hill tribes. So, from its inception, the British Government tried to rule Manipur without any racial discrimination and to maintain equality so as not to lose their confidence in the British Government by small ethnic groups and tribes. In this connection, the Boro Saheb (Chief Commissioner) made a public declaration of the Queen of England's order in 1895 that the British Government of Manipur would protect and preserve all customs and religion of the small ethnic groups of Manipur.

Taking advantage of Queen Victoria's order, Mabudhou Moirang Ningthou (Moirangthem Ramananda, Pandit Achouba) tried to revive the ancient custom and festival of Lai-Haraoba (pleasing of indigenous local deities) which had been banned and ceased from the time of Maharaj Garibniwaj. In fact, from 1723 A.D. worshipping and performing of festivals of the umang-lais (local gods) which were reverentially believed by Manipurians were banned and the shrines of nine umang-lais and two lanmabis (goddesses) were destroyed by a royal order.

The functions and festivals of lai-haraoba which had thus remained banned and ceased for a long time probably one hundred and sixty two years were revived on request to the new British Government following the order of the English Queen. So, in the year 1820 the 6th Mabudhou Ibungo Moirang Ningthou made the long ceased national festival of Manipuri Umanglai Haraoba revived as allowed by Boro Saheb (British officer). If the Queen of England had not given the order and Mabudhou Moirang Ningthou did not try earnestly, the lai haraoba we see at present might not been seen.

The Britishers could see in a little sylvan and hilly place called Manipur lying at a remote corner of the earth, a play called Rasallela which was in no way inferior to the Russian ballet, and they were amazed at the unique show. Since the rasaleela had a close affinity with Vaisnav Religious ways and had been regarded as a sacred thing, the Britishers could not enter into the arena and see it at a close distance except seeing it from a far.

But, the rasaleela which was usually performed on Parvadis in religious manner and was forbidden to the Englishmen from close watching for many years in the past, was shown before them for the first time as a fun programme on the purnima (full-moon) day of the month of Ingen (June-July) of 1904, in the first decade of the 20th Century in which Sanatombi was the lead dancer was performed at the Boro Saheb's bungalow by setting up a big mandap. Truly speaking, in the time when the Hindu system of untouchability was raging high in Manipuri Society, princess Sanatombi who was ostracized for being the wife of Bor Saheb, the Englishman was deprived of the right to organize a rasa leela to pay obeisance to Shri Govinda.

The presence of the factors i.e. Sanatombi being a Manipuri princess, the existence of British rule in Manipur and the desire of the Englishmen to watch a rasaleela, demanded a performance of it and the then expert Rasadhari Mutum Oja Jhulonmacha cleverly recomposed a Nityarasa by omitting a parts which might seem to be sacrilegious if included and replacing them by alaps of Hindustani music and performed it at Boro Saheb's bungalow by erecting a large mandap. But it was a spectacle so pleasant and exquisite that, though it could not be played in the precincts of Shri Govindaji, people took it as a beautiful Nityarasa. **Manipur Raas as an Indian classical dance**

When unofficial news begun to spread that Manipuri Jagoi Raas has been included in the list of Indian classical dance all India was amazed and at the same time the Manipuris were overwhelmed with excitement at the incredible happy news. But, in fact, no one can certainly say who among the great and eminent Indian leaders of that time had really seen the Manipuri Jagoi Raas with his own eyes. But, there is one hearsay report that only Vaiswa Kavi Ravindranath Thakur had seen Vasanta Raas at the royal palace of Maharaj Brajendra Kishore, the king of Takhel (Tripura).

"... in one of the poet's journey when he saw Manipuri Raas at Maharaj Brajendra Kishore's palace he said on seeing this dance my journey to the eastern side is fruitful."

The popular belief of the probability of Rabindranath Thakur's witnessing of Basanta Raas was that he had come to Takhel (Tripura) six or seven times as he was an intimate friend of the king and in his frequent visits he might have seen it, but there is no sufficient proof of it. True information about Tagore is that he stayed in Tripura from Monday, 27th March (Phalgun Purnima), 1899 till the end of Holi (Dol Jatra) and he saw Rakhal Jagoi and Goshta Leela at Machhimpur Village of Sylhet in 1919, but his witnessing of Raas is not as authentic as the above two instances. Yet, the high probability of Tagore's seeing Manipur Raas is that the Prince of Wales of England visited Calcutta in 1921, for which the British Agency of Manipur arranged a Nityaras at Calcutta for His Highness and the poet might have been invited to it as a Nobel Laureate and see it.

Like Viswa Kavi Rabindranath Thakur some other important Indians who endeavoured to have a healthy existence of Indian classical dances, had in their mind our Manipuri dance also. For instance, Shri Ambalal Sarabhai of Ahamedabad met Pangambam Nabakumar at Shillong in the

summer of 1927 and asked the latter to teach Manipuri dance to some students. Nabakumar accepted it and taught Manipuri dance to students at Ahamadabad for some time.

The certificate given to him says –

“This is to certify that Nabakumar Thakur had been teaching our students the art of dancing as practiced in Manipur. He was of great assistance to us in the revival of ancient art at our Institution... He is excellent teacher. He takes a great deal of interest in his pupils.”

As a result of a determined long struggle to free India from British colonial rule and to create a country called Bharatvarsha by uniting many princely states under the able leadership of Mahatma Gandhi together with Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru and Sardar Patel etc. India won freedom at midnight of 15th August, 1947 and an independent India was born. With the winning of this freedom, India desired to reconstruct its old tradition and name of Indian music and dance which had remained sick and inactive for about one hundred and thirty years and to show to the world of the existence of the age long tradition of its classical dances and in that matter Manipuri Raas also was put at the front. Eminent personages of India, though they had not actually seen Manipuri Jagoi Raas, got correct and detailed information from British officers and knew that there is no other dance in the world which is more classical and peerlessly beautiful as Manipuri Jagoi Raas.

It was the British officers only who really nurtured and nourished Indian culture. They really knew the value of culture and its usefulness to human society. They sought and collected many ancient, valuable and disappeared manuscripts and bought out as books. Soon after India got independence, many noted figures came to Manipur but none of them had the opportunity to witness Manipuri Jagoi Raas. The first Prime Minister of India, Shri Jawaharlal Nehru came to Manipur in November, 1952 as his first visit to this land but he could not see Manipuri Jagoi Raas.

The Prime Minister of India came to Manipur on Saturday, 28th March, 1953 as his second visit. Also Mr. U. Nu, the Prime Minister of Burma arrived at Imphal the next day, on Sunday the 29th March. Though the sport of Hiyangtannaba (boat race) and other leelas (plays) were shown to the ministers, any of the raas leelas to the ministers, any of the raas leelas could not be shown to them as no Parvadins did not occurred during the time of their visit. Then, Shri Rajendra Prasad, the first President of India came to Manipur. On Thursday, the 21st of the month of Fairen, 1954 A.D. and in the evening Rajendra Prasad came to Darbar Hall and watched Manipuri Jagoi Rasa, Moirang Parva, Manipuri drum beating, songs and plays in which the king sat together with the highest dignitary and he was the first among Indian high dignitaries to see Manipuri Jagoi Rasa for the first time.

Since the time of Maharaj Gambhir Singh in the 19th Century, Manipur has been in good relation with the British and has been helping each other. Every time when the royal palace was shifted to Bishnupur, Langthabal and Imphal Kangla, the British Residency was also allowed to remain in its proximity. So, the British officers would surely be able to see all the cultural programmes

(of dance and music) performed at the palace from a far even though they had no access to the place of performance for the customary ban on foreigners to enter sacrosanct areas.

Towards the middle of the 19th century all the Europeans were proud of creating a form of classical dance to the music of Tchaikovsky called Ballet and its gradual development as well as the capacity to produce a lot of good ballerinas and to present to the world. Truly speaking, in the realm of dance and music there was no place in the world create and perform immaculately excellent ballets like Swan Lake and sleeping Beauty.

“Paris and London were the taste setters, and it was London that in 1845 witnessed the pas de quarte, for which the French choreographer Jules Perrot brought together, for four performances, four of the greatest ballerinas of the day... The high point of the classical ballet under the Tsars was reached with St. Petersburg productions of the sleeping Beauty (1890), the Nut cracker (1892) and Swan Lake (1895), all with music composed by Peter Tchaikovsky, and Raymonda (1898), composed by Aleksander Glazuhor (1865-1936)”.

The British officers who had seen the acme of ballet creations, when they landed in Manipur at the North East region of India, a land surrounded by lush green mountains, discovered the Jagoi Rasa. Jagoi Rasa depicts the amorous dance play of Shri Krishna with dancers adorning Dhora-chura (head-gear) and the potloi (flamboyant dress of Manipuri woman for dancing etc.) clad Gopis. It usually plays the whole night captivating the audience which naturally amazed the British. Though they were not allowed to enter the mandop, they saw it from afar and fell in love. They had not expected such an exquisitely beautiful dance not only in India but also anywhere in the world. It would be safe to say that they were astonished.

By the end of 1890, many other people heard well about Manipuri Jagoi Raas from the British Officers posted in Manipur. Mr. J.W. Quinton, Chief Commissioner of Assam who came to Manipur with Lt. Col. Skeen, Mr. Cossings, Lt. Simpson etc. on Sunday, 22nd March, 1891 earnestly asked the kind of Manipur to show jagoi raas to him and was complied. Some scholars have the opinion that the Raas shown to the Britishers would not be the Raas to be played on Parvadins, but the new Raas of Nartaras created during the reign of Surchandra Maharaj and which is accessible to all. This Raas was composed in the reign of Maharaj Surchandra Singh in order to show Raas to all classes of people. Before this none except the vaisnavas belonging to Narotom Paribar was allowed to audience it.

Subsequently, after Manipur was colonized by the British, when Major Maxwell, the Political Agent ruled Manipur, his wife princess Sanatombi, the daughter of Surchandra Maharaj led a raasleela and was performed on Wednesday, the 15th of the month of Ingen (27th of July), 1904 at the Residency Bungalow before English officers and others. The Nataras was taught by dance teacher Shri Mutum Jhulonmacha in a simplified way to make the performance easy.

The news of the satisfaction of the Englishmen on being the Jagoi Raas might have reached London, the capital of England. British officers were people who respect the religion of foreign nations. In spite of their supremacy and authority they never set foot on the mandop and encroached

upon or violated sanctity of religious affairs. Since there had been the news of permissibility of performance of Jagoi Raas at the British Residency at Imphal, the Prince of Wales, when he came to Calcutta in 1921, told the British Agency at Imphal to give him a chance to see Raas dance and the British Agency asked Sir Churachand Maharaj to send a troupe of dancers to Calcutta and accordingly the king himself went to Calcutta with some dancers.

Thus, collecting detailed information from British Officers, high officials of the newly independent India, after the establishment of Sangeet Natak Akademi at Delhi in 1957, organized a seminar in 1958 and thereat it was declared that Manipuri Raas, Bharat Natyam, Kathakali and Kathak dances would become the classical dances of India.

“... In the dance seminar, unique of its kind, held at New Delhi in 1958, under the auspicious of Sangeet Natak Akademi, Indian dancers were classified mainly in three divisions by dance scholars, dancers and artistes of the country. Resolutions were passed accordingly and recommendations were sent to the Govt. for giving an authoritative stamp of academic colour.”

So, from that resolution of seminar Bharat Natyam, Kathakali, Manipuri and Kathak were classed as classical, Odissi after much heated discussions and Kuchipudi as traditional and all the rest as folk dances.

Conclusion

Manipuri dance underwent several changes during the 20th century A.D. After the defeat of Manipur in the Anglo-Manipuri War in 1891 and when British rule was established, there came big changes in various fields in Manipur. After the Indian independence in 1947, Manipur was merged into India in 1949. Not very later, the Indian constitution was adopted and India became democratic republic on 26th January, 1950. The first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, the first President Dr. Rajendra Prasad and other great Indian leaders of independent India wanted to show the time honoured rich tradition of Indian dance and music before the world, and therefore, they desired to reconstruct and strengthen it, Manipuri Rassa Leela could get a front seat among the then existing dancers of India for the new endeavour. Thus, in the historic declaration of Indian classical dance and music by India Government there included Manipuri Rassa Leela, Bharat Natyam dance of South India, Kathak dance of Northern India and Kathakali dance of Kerala. Thus, the availing of seat by Manipuri Raas in the great hall of Indian tradition of dance was believed to be influenced by the high commendations of the British officers and Viswa Kavi Rabindranath Tagore of Manipuri Rassa.

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