

Development of non-religious dances of Manipur

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Abstract

In the Meitei society, the words ‘jagoi’ (dance) and ‘eshei’ (music) meant more of the ones which were non-religious in nature. Mandap leelas or the traditional dance dramas performed in the religious premises and other artistic activities, like Raasleela which are performed on Parvadin (specific days) along the line of Gouriya Vaishnavism are highly devotional in nature. Some Vaishnava devotees also consider the mandap leelas such as Gouraleela, Goshta as a regular religious practice. Many people also perform a mandap leela to avert a prediction of a misfortune. Quite a few forms of non-religious dances faded because of lack of patronage and practice. Some of the very popular dance forms which are non-religious in nature like MarabakJagoi, BaiwaliJagoi, KhambaThoibi, LeimaJagoi, MaibiJagoi and Oriental Dance will be discussed in brief.

Key word: Marabak, KhambaThoibi, Baiwali, Leima, Maibi, Oriental

Introduction:

During the late 19th and early 20th century new genres of dance and music evolved in Manipur. The reasons were varied. They ushered in a new wave of cultural metamorphosis in the land which was otherwise known popularly for Raasleela. Besides these creations of experts that were performed on the stage also developed profusely and practiced by eminent artistes.

Some of the newly emerged non-religious dances will be discussed in the following section.

(a) MarabakJagoi:

This form of dance developed in Manipur and was performed by skilled artistes. When a specific genre of music entered the land from outside, it popularly came to be recognized as Hindustani music or Kalawati sangeet and the form of dance that came with it was recognized as MarabakJagoi.

There is information of students learning it at the dance institute called Shri Shri Govinda Natyashala or Nachghar or Jagoi Sabi Loisang at the royal palace.

In the time of Maharaj Chandrakirti the institute was highly developed. Many forms of art i.e. MarabakJagoi (Kathak), Hindustani Sangeet, Tabla, Pakhawaj, Violin, Accordion, Esraj, etc. were added. Boys were made to grow long hair and were taught acting and dancing.

According to the scholars the dance form known as 'MarabakJagoi' is analogous to the dance of Northern India called Kathak. There are two opinions about the coming of this dance in Manipur – first, it was learnt by Narasingh Maharaj's attendants when he went to meet his friend, the King of Jaipur at Vrindavan and second, two dance teachers from outside namely Kunjo Misri and Gopi Mohon came to Manipur in the time of Chandrakirti Maharaj and taught the dance.

"In the last part of Sir Chandrakirti's reign Kathak dance was introduced by Kunjo Misri and Gopimohon in the Royal Palace which was called by the Manipuris MarbakJagoi (Foreign dance). It became very popular."ⁱ

Young men attending Shri Shri Govinda Natyasala of the Royal Palace in the time of Chandrakirti Maharaj wore ghungru on their feet, wore dress akin to Begum Poshak (dress of Begum / royal Muslim women) and kept long hair and learned the dance. The men who were adept in the dance performed in the mandap leelas imitating women. The dress comprised white churidar, white pumyat (kurta), dupatta as lengyanfi (cloth hanging from the shoulder) and waistband.

Of all the changes which were brought to Manipuri society during the British tenure while Churachand Maharaj was a minor, the allowing of women to learn MarabakJagoi at the dance institute at Sana Konung (Royal Palace) was a major one.

Women were allowed to play roles in mandap leelas at the palace by replacing male actors who impersonated women. Most of the women artistes of Manipur had originated from mandap leela and especially the very popular MarabakJagoi, Paskhela, Khubak-ishei (devotional songs by female singers sung during Rathayatra) etc.

The MarabakJagoi artistes, also danced along with the leela kirtans sung by male artistes using tabla, khol, pakhwaj, harmonium and tanpura. The noblemen of Churachand often performed this on the days of their observance of Ekadashi and other similar occasions.

(b) Khamba-ThoibiJagoi(dance)

This is a duet dance performed by a male and a female dancer. The male artiste acting as Khamba wears a Khamenchatpa (a specific kind of fabric worn as a dhoti), Ningkhamsamjin (a cloth functioning as a hip cover), velvet half-shirt, KhujiPokchaobi (big bangle), tal (armlet) etc. A woman acting as Thoibi wears a fanekmapannaibi (traditional striped lower garment worn by Manipuri women), velvet blouse, kajenglei, urikset, (head-dress), bangles and different kinds of necklaces. Since decades this dance is one of the most popular items till date. An Australian lady who came to Manipur in 1951-52 named Louis Lightfoot said, “Khamba-Thoibi dance item is one of the most popular in repertoire of Jagoi today.”ⁱⁱ

All the eminent dancers of Manipur performed Khamba-ThoibiJagoi. Some of them are Rajkumar Priyagopal Sana, Rajkumar Danisana, Rajkumar Singhajit Sana, Nongmaithem Sudhir, Konthoujam Indubhushan Singh, Guru Aribam Baldev Sharma, Shantikishwar Sharma, Huidrom Chitrasen Singh, Tourangbam Nodiachand, Samanduram Tondon Devi, Thiyam Surjyamukhi Devi, Hanjabam Aruna Devi, Kshetrimayum Ibetombi Devi, Tombinou Devi etc. The Khamba-Thoibi dance seemed to have been performed first as a scene of the traditional play named Moirang Parva Leela which was created after the British started ruling Manipur. There is no evidence of the occurrence of Khamba-Thoibi dance before the existence of Moirang Parva Leela. Thus, it can be said that Khamba-Thoibi dance was an excerpt of Moirang Parva Leela.

After cessation of the festival of Lai Haraoba in Manipur for about two hundred years, it was resumed and observed in the month of Kalen (April-May) in the year 1898 A.D. and at all haraobung (place of deities in villages) the Khamba-Thoibi dance was included as a part of Thougai-Jagoi (ritualistic dance).

Later, this dance was performed on the stage by four or five pairs of dancers and till date it happens to be one of the most popular dance items in all cultural programmes.

(c) LeimaJagoi:

From Khamba-ThoibiJagoi there evolved a new kind of woman's solo dance known as Thoibi or LeimaJagoi. In the Moirang Parva Leela was gaining immense popularity around 1930 A.D., a solo dance of Thoibi was there. Gradually from this, ThoibiJagoi or LeimaJagoi had developed. Performing of LeimaJagoi at Laiharaoba by young girls after receiving proper training is still a popular practice in Manipur. LeimaJagoi is usually performed in group.

(d) MaibiJagoi:

Another non-religious dance choreographed for stage was MaibiJagoi performed by trained dancers. This style of dance adapted from the formal dance of the Maibi (priestess) was first produced by Louis Lightfoot, the Australian visitor who came to Manipur in 1950/51. Eminent artistes of that time, Shri Khangembam Gulapi (Natasankirtana singer), Shri Thokchom Angou (dholak player) and Rajani Maibi (the renowned Maibi) and the well-knowndancer Kshetrimayum Ibetombi Devi gave the first performance at the residence of Shri Yumnam Gourmani Engineer. The entire programme was arranged by Louise Lightfoot. The performance had amazed the audience and it was highly applauded by them. Louise Lightfoot later toured the world with Kshetrimayum Ibetombi Devi and presented this dance at various venues. To express her satisfaction in the composition of the dance, Louis Light foot wrote, "Our happiest times were when we sat together for rehearsal. Ibetombi's gipsy-like brother trilling his sweetest on the bamboo flute, good Angou Singh crouching to give superhuman inspiration on his dholok, Maibee Rajani chanting with gay garrulousness and mischievous eyes the spring dance of "Eema Leimaren", and penakhongba bowing his very best. Then, little Ibetombi's feet would fly

over the floor at a dazzling, increasing speed and Gulapi (Ningtingale of Manipur) would throw in wonderful advice and our builder host Shri Gouramani Singh would strut and splutter with sheer pride and delight. The joy of it will never leave my heart and it made up for all troubles.”ⁱⁱⁱ

(d) BaiwaliJagoi:

When the Japanese troops reached Imphal during the World War II popularly known as Japan Lan in Meitei, a large number of British troops were also deployed to combat the Japanese invaders. The war continued for about one year and the Japanese bombed at various places in Manipur. Again in April 1943 in the heart of Imphal they dropped a bomb and about one hundred persons attending a feast at the mandap of Chingangbam Gulap were killed.

During the time of Japan Lan (World War II) the financial situation in Manipur degenerated considerably. The MarbakJagoi dancers with instrumentalists (tabla, harmonium, flute players) performed at the military camps to earn a living during the war. The British soldiers were very fond of the dances and music of Marbak Jagoi. Thus, within a year many dance groups sprang up in many localities of Manipur. The dancers began to perform in erotic styles to attract the soldiers. Many well-known and lesser known dancers (even untrained ones) started to perform MarbakJagoi to earn money. There are cases of all the members of a family forming such groups for the entertainment of the British soldiers. During this period, Manipuri society had mistaken it as Kotha dance (dancers of the courtyards) and looked down upon it and called it Baiwali dance.

“After Manipur war it was very much degenerated so much so that the gentleman class hated to see and it was used as an instrument for extorting money from the low class people of Manipur and neighbouring provinces.”^{iv}

Even very late after the second world war, the Baiwali dance was used by some dance groups as means of earning money at places like Assam and Bengal. It died down gradually and from 1960 onwards no trace of it was found in the land.

(e) Oriental Dance:

When British proscenium theatre grew up one after another in Manipur, the oriental dance which was introduced in Manipur around 1935 was often performed on stage and became a popular kind of a dance that was not known to the people before. It is said that the dance was brought in Manipur by students who went outside for studies. Some young Manipuri dancers who were not only renowned in Manipur by that time but were also well known outside Manipur were Rajkumar Priyagopal Singh, Bachaspatimayum Shantikishwar Sharma, Yambem Mahabir Singh, Akoijjam Indubhushan Singh and Km. Hanjabam Aruna Devi.

Most of the oriental dances shown were products of the artistes' own imaginations and adaptations from stories of the Puranas. The dances were based on the stories of Shri Krishna's childhood, Shiva and Parvati, Shri Chaitanya, episodes from the Mahabharata and the Ramayana and life of Rajarshi Bhagyachandra. The stories of Ramayana, Mahabharata, Lord Chaitanya were repeatedly and profusely recited by the traditional story tellers of Manipur. On the other hand it was a time when western education was also being widely spreading throughout Manipur. It was a transition period in the land. Hence, the Manipuri audience relished the newly practiced Oriental dance.

In the Oriental Dance body movements were excessively employed and the expressions of the eye, face and limbs as well as the dress depicted a story. The vigorous and forceful techniques of Tandava were used.

"...employ the wonderful muscular movements (of eyes, head, shoulders arms, hands and strange body stance) roughly familiar to western audiences through authentic and commercialized adoptions."^v

The dance was performed with the accompaniment of musical instruments, such as Manipuri Pung (drum), Kartal (cymbal), dholak, pakhawaj, tabla and flute. The costumes were akin to that of Manipuri Jagoi Raas, Gouraleela and Hao-jagoi (tribal dance). New kinds of head dresses and costumes were also designed by the artistes that would suit the particular theme and character.

Some of the well-known Oriental dance productions performed by illustrious dancers of that time were Shri Rajkumar Priyagopalsana's Bhayachandra, Mangshat, Shri Krishna Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, Kamsa Bodha, Arati, Shri Krishna Leela, Khamba Jagoi, Shiva Tandav, Nataraj and Dandiyaraski Jagoi, Shri Bachaspatimayum Shantikishwar Sharma's Sagar Milan, Agni Nritya (Fire dance), Chitrangada Arjun, Shri Krishna, Udanta Nritya and Kaliyadaman, Shri Yambem Mahabir Singh's Kite-Dance, Durga Dance, Bharat Mata, Chitrangada, Shiva Parvati, Mahish Mardan, Krishnarjun, Ramayan, Abhimanyu and Kamdeva, Shri Guruaribam Baldev Sharma's Nataraj, Shiva Tandava, Shiva Parvati, Mahish Mardan, Krishnarjun, Ramayan, Abhimanyu, Bir Paona and Chinglen and Shri Akoijam Indubhushan Singh's Kaliyadaman.

Conclusion:

The cultural policy of the Government of India after independence was mainly to highlight the cultural heritage of the country. Raasleela which was a kind of theatre spectacle was given the label of Classical and the other dance forms that also contributed extensively in shaping the cultural framework of the land were not taken into consideration and they naturally declined as they were considered as undignified forms of dance practices. These other dance forms that were non-religious in nature took inspiration from Raasleela and other mythological tales stood much away from the performing tradition of Raasleela that maintained its purity and sanctity in the temple spaces and were a part of the religious practice of the people of the land. Raasleela was also highly revered by the Britishers who encouraged its performance and the participation of women in the religious and non-religious dances.

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