



TRADITION OF DANCE DRAMA IN MANIPUR

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ABSTRACT

Dance is a form performing Art consisting of a pattern of movements, either improvised or deliberately selected. This movement has artistic and often metaphorical value. Dance can be classified and described by choreography by its collection of moves, or by its point of origin. An important variation is to be drawn between the contexts of theatrical and participatory dance, although these two types are not always completely different; both may have exceptional functions, whether community based, ritualistic, Competitive, martial or sacred. Manipuri dance not only consists of Folk, Classical and solos but we also have a tradition of Dance Drama. We can find a lot of Dance dramatic elements in Traditional Theatres like Lai Haraoba, Raas Leela, Nata sankirtana, Martial Arts, and minor theatres like Gouraleela Goshta Leela (Sanshenba) and Udukhalleela. Further we can also find a lot of Dance dramatic elements from different Forms of entertainment like Paaskhelamaan bhajan Murli Haran and marbaakjagoi which was very much popular in the 70s and 80s which were appreciated by all. Dance Drama is not only a form of entertainment but it also plays a major role in conveying messages to the society like Theatre. There are many Choreographers who experiment Dance Drama in different genres like: Historical, social, Folk tale, Creative, Contemporary, Epic, Classical (Ballet) etc. Dance Dramas of Manipur can be divided into three Categories, viz;

- 1). Evolution of Modern Dance (Ballet) in India.
- 2). Turning point in Uday Shankar's dancing career.
- 3). Birth of Dance Drama in Manipur.

Thus based on the present context of the study the classifications and sub divisions of Dance Dramas can conveniently be placed in this manner.

KeyWords: Nritya-Natya, Lai-Haraoba, Rasleela, ThangTa, Bhanusingher-Padavali,, Gouraleela, Gosthaleela (Sanshenba), Udukhalleela,



INTRODUCTION

Dance drama is a form of performing art narrating a story through dance wherein music is prominent, dialogues in prose and poetry are also allowed. Dance drama is of Indian Origin and it is known as "Nritya Natya". Nritya means dance and Natya means drama and this term was coined by the famous Nobel laureate Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore.

Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore was attracted to the Manipuri dance form for its many features. One of them is the devotional aspects along with the thematic background. The purpose of dance in Manipur has always been to please the Gods. The process of pleasing went through various phases and we find the community observing festivals like Lai Haraoba and Rasleela through Dance and Music as a medium of dedication. Manipuri Rasleela is accompanied by the Padavali songs. The lyrics of which described the divine love and bhakti of Radha and Krishna. We have seen that Tagore was absorbed in Padavali lyrics at a very tender age for the beautiful compositional and the descriptive aspect of the Padavali poem. He wrote quite a few poems in Brajaboli like Vaisnava lyrics in the nickname Bhanu Singha which are collected under the name of Bhanu SingherPadavali. These lyrics serve as a perfect accompaniment to Manipuri dances and often BhanusingherPadavali is performed as a Dance Drama in Manipuri dance style today. So we can see that Tagore could relate his feeling to these aspects of Manipuri Dance while viewing this dance form.

Tagore himself blended dance movement and gestures in the characters that he depicted. The apt use of these movements to build up the characters which have been highly appreciated by many and the famous painting by Abanindranath Tagore, where Rabindranath is portrayed dancing as a "Baul" with the instrument Ektara, and his dancing portrait by Nandalal Bose only confirm to the sensation that was created with this new vision of assimilating dance in the body language of theatre. But till 1921 these dances were treated as expressions of joy and no formal training of dances was there. Even so, Tagore wanted to build up an atmosphere and taste for dance through his drama performances in Santiniketan.

Being impressed by Manipuri Dances Rabindranath Tagore decided to have a dance teacher of Manipuri at Santiniketan. The rest is history starting from OjaBudhimanta Singh, Guru Nabakumar Singh etc. fulfills the dream of Rabindranath Tagore by opening the tradition of teaching Manipuri Dance in Santiniketan. Currently, there are many Manipuri Dance faculties teaching Manipuri Dance, Dance Dramas and Rabindra Nritya in the Department of Rabindra Sangeet, Dance and drama Visva Bharati, Santiniketan.



EVOLUTION OF MODERN DANCE(BALLET) IN INDIA

Next comes the father of modern Indian dance Uday Shankar. Uday Shankar, being born in an artistically inclined family, quite naturally, grew up to take up fine arts as his career. After his basic training in Arts from JJ School of arts and GandharvaMahavidyalaya. Uday Shankar went to Royal School of Arts, London, for higher studies. In the UK, he was introduced to various performing artists of Britain. Soon, with his extraordinary skills in painting, he acquired a scholarship that sent him to study painting in Rome. And in a little while he was travelling through Europe, where he came across several contemporary artistes.

Before coming in depth about Uday Shankar, let us discuss the term Ballet. The history of ballet begins around 1500 in Italy. Terms like "ballet" and "ball" stem from the Italian word "ballare", which means "to dance". When Catherine de Medici of Italy married the French King Henry II, she introduced early dance styles into Court life in France. At first, the dancers wear masks, layers upon layers of brocaded costuming, pantaloons, large headdresses, and ornaments. Such restrictive clothing was sumptuous to look at but difficult to move in. Dance steps were composed of small hops, slides, curtsies, promenades, and gentle turns. Dancing shoes had small heels and resembled formal dress shoes rather than any contemporary ballet shoe we might recognize today.

The official terminology and vocabulary of ballet was gradually codified in French over the next 100 years and during the reign of Louis XIV, the king himself performed many of the popular dances of the time. Professional dancers were hired to perform at Court functions after King Louis and Fellow noblemen had stopped dancing. From Italian roots, ballets in France and Russia developed their own stylistic character. By 1850 Russia had become a leading creative centre of the dance world as ballet. Continuing to evolve, certain new looks and theatrical illusions caught on and became quite fashionable. Dancing (on toes) became popular during the early part of the nineteenth century, with women often performing in white, bell-like skirts that ended at the calf. Point dancing was reserved for women only, and this exclusive taste for female dancers and characters inspired a certain type of recognizable romantic heroine, a sylph-like Fairy whose pristine goodness and purity inevitably triumphs over evil or injustice.



TURNING POINT IN UDAY SHANKAR'S DANCING CAREER

Uday Shankar's idea of giving a new dimension to Indian dance came up when he met the great Russian Ballerina Anna Pavlova. The meeting was a phenomenal one, as it gave him a whole new perspective about dance presentations. Pavlova intended to work on Indian-based themes such as Radha-Krishna and Hindu marriage. And she found her best choice in Uday Shankar. Both the artists together, at their show in Royal Opera House, presented their ballet on Radha and Krishna that drew huge applause from the European audience. This entire experience inspired Uday Shankar to introduce new aspects to Indian dance.

When he returned to India after his studies, he returned with a vision and a determination to realize it. He was accompanied by a French Pianist, Simon Barbieri, who was his disciple and dance partner, and a Swiss sculptress, Alice Bonner, who wanted to study Indian art history. The three travelled across the country performing their work, reaching out to all nooks and corners of the nation. After a series of trips to various places, he realized that Indian culture had much more to offer than what he was aware of. With this realization, he set out a new campaign for knowledge. He made trips to several villages and remote places, where he studied different folk art forms. He was highly intrigued by the diversities that various classical dance forms had in store to offer out of a range of art forms that he was introduced to, he chose Kathakali from Kerala and popularized it all over West Bengal.

BIRTH OF DANCE DRAMA IN MANIPUR

Understanding his tremendous capacity to advocate dance in the Country, Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore persuaded him to open a performing arts school in India. In 1939, Uday Shankar India Cultural Centre was established at Almora, in the foothills of the Himalayas. It included training in Kathakali under Shankaran Namboodiri, Bharatanatyam under Kandappa Pillai, Manipuri under Guru MaisnamAmubi Singh and classical music under UstadAllauddin Khan. Soon, it turned out to be a centre for great music and dance artists to come together. But this was a short-lived glory, as the Centre had to shut down in a few years due to lack of funds.

Coming to Manipur, Dance drama(Ballet) was brought into this small state by Guru MaisnamAmubi Singh after his association with Uday Shankar. Meanwhile, It is very much important to know the difference between Ballet and Dance Drama. Ballet is a classical



dance form of the West performed only with Orchestral Music, whereas dance drama is a performance narrating a story, wherein music is prominent, dialogue in prose and poetry are also allowed. Also known as Nritya Natya, Dance Drama is of Indian Origin. The difference between the occidental form of ballet and the Indian dances as mentioned by Dr.Naryan Menon is worth analysing. He says "In the dances of India the performer is the apex or centre character, from the artist emanates everything like a singer. Every image comes from him. In the occidental form of ballet, the dancers express ideas by their performances. The centre is not the dancers but the choreographer. In the context of Indian dances, even if the dance is performed in a group, the dance is a performance of soloists. Thus, there is ample room for the artists to express their emotions. There is very little room for choreography unlike the western dances. In short, there is no room for choreography in the Indian dances. The Western ballets are like a painting done by the choreographer. The artists are assembled within the view of the choreographer."

The stylized dialogue and song of dance drama were avoided when Uday Shankar came to the scene, which used instrumental music instead. It was known as ballet to the then Choreographer, which was spread throughout India. When it came to Manipur the classical Manipuri dances were found highly suitable to this new art form. Subsequently, a Ballet unit was opened up at JNMDA in the year 1975 as a plan scheme in the 5 year plan. Later on renamed as Production Unit. The unit was inaugurated by Shri L.P. Singh, the then governor of Manipur and Chairman JNMDA on 16th January, 1976. The unit began primarily with a view to encourage new experimental work in Manipuri style, particularly in the genre of Dance Drama.

While the Western Ballet is based on Western Classical dance, the Indian Ballet is based not only on classical dance but also folk and other dances. A clear distinction between the Western Ballet and its Indian Counterpart is that the former is based on harmonic music whereas the later on melodious music. So, the Indian form is better distinguished as Dance Drama, and this term is being popularly used. The present trend in India is that many choreographers are experimenting with mime, acting and improvisation in addition to the use of dance.

This modified or rather innovative form is also known as non - verbal theatre in India. Uday Shankar was a talented performer, not a guru of Classical Dance. Thus, even if he began to enact the dance on the platform of Western Choreograph, he used the style and



movements of the Indian Dance and with a few students the new style and movements of ballet came into vogue. Shanti Bardhan composed such ballets with his organization. "Little Ballet Troupe" and R.K. Singhajit composed Ballet in Manipuri style in his institute Triveni Kala Sangam. Guru Amubi's Shri Krishna Balya-Leela can also be termed as a Dance Drama. His association with Uday Shankar brought some new features by adding dances that have existed already, Uday Shankar was a pioneer in the research of old dances of India and introduction of Western ballet in India.

Next came Raj Kumar Priyogopalsana, director of the Manipuri ballet unit and former Principal of Jawaharlal Nehru Manipur Dance Academy. His Bhagyachandra Ballet was full of novelty "KeibuKeioiba ", "Mangsat" and "Panthoibi" are some of his well known works. The elements of Nata Sankirtana, Rasleela and thang-Ta are profusely used in his Dance Dramas, no props are used. He is an expert in folk based stories. Instruments like Flute, Violin, Pena and Sananta are used . Unlike the symphony of the west where 50 to 60 instruments are used, he employs a few melodious instruments. Guru ThiyamTarun Kumar also worked in the production of "NongdolLeima" and "SarikMakhol". His contribution in the field was remarkable.

Some other Gurus and Choreographers who worked in this field are Thingbaijam Babu, Thokchom Chaotombi, Tondon Devi and Ng. Sonarchand. The answer is here beginning from Guru Amubi, Raj Kumar Singhajit, Guru ThiyamTarun Kumar and Raj Kumar Priyogopalsana, the Dance Dramas and ballets thus innovated by them have not been able to perfect the classical form of dances that are Rasleela, Cholom, MaibiJagoi and Thang-Taa. These are all a form of dance based upon the classical dances of Manipur. Even these Dance Drama and ballet cannot be termed as the classical Manipuri dance, they may not be termed as "Modern Dance" as innovated by Isadora Duncans of America. It is not that enacting ballets are not good, but these are brought in the systems as the progress of time.

Around 1945-46, the style of dance drama was innovated into the soil of Manipur. Nowadays as we see Goura Leela, Sanshenba(GosthaLeela) and Udukhal are having the form of Dance drama in larger amounts. It's a fusion of dialogue, music and acting which expresses various emotions of the human being. Goura Leela was introduced during the reign of Chandrakirti Maharaj i.e. 200 years ago. Before so many years back Goura Leela was being



played mostly in the mandap by having a well decoration. Thus, we may assume that the characteristic of dance drama in Manipuri tradition came into being 200 years ago.

In 1972, during the month of May, Triveni Kala Sangam of New Delhi organized a Ballet Festival at JNMDA. Together with that, the academy also presented its Ballet RajashreeBhagyachandra jointly by the students and Gurus of its Academy. After completing the course of Choreography in Delhi from Shrimati Maya Rao, Ng. Sonarchand transforms the drama Miss Bottle written by G.C. Tongbra into Ballet/Dance Drama and played at Imphal. This was the first performance of Ballet/Dance Drama which made the people of Manipur aware of this art form. From 1973-75 onwards, Jawaharlal Nehru Manipur Dance Academy took the full initiative of composing a Dance Drama and Ballet and spread to the people all over India and abroad as well and were praised highly. Still now it is a long way to go into a deep Research and findings as its Characters vary from time to time.

CONCLUSION

The first prime Minister of India Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru described Manipur as the land of Jewels. The name itself depicts its rich cultural heritage. As my Topic is related with the Tradition of Dance drama in Manipur here I would like to highlight the Tradition of Dance Dramas as we can find from different Art forms like Lai Haraoba, Rasleela, Different traditional theatres, minor theatres etc. Uday Shanker with his association with Ana Pavlova introduces Ballet in India. Uday Shankar is the pioneer in the research of old dances of India and introduction of western Ballet in India. Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore introduces Nritya Natya better known as Dance Drama. Guru MaisnamAmubi's Association with Uday Shankar produces a new form of Manipuri Dance Drama. Gurudev Rabindranath's love for Manipuri Dance inspired him to open Manipuri Dance class in Santiniketan.. So,these forms of Dance can be better termed as Dance Drama. Historically it is said that Gouraleela was introduced during the reign of Chandrakirti Maharaj i,e 200 years ago where it was performed with well decorated Mandap. Thus we may assume that the Characteristics of Dance Drama in Manipuri tradition came into being 200 years back.



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