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The Journey and Influence of the Royal Courts of Tripura on the nationwide migration and hybridisation of Manipuri Dance

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Abstract

Manipuri dance is one of eight classical dance forms of India originating from Manipur. Although culturally rich, it was initially practised within their isolated valleys, and the development of this dance and its popularity was initially and primarily confined within their boundaries. The purpose of the study is to determine the role of the Royal Courts of Tripura in the migration and hybridisation of Manipuri dance. It explores the role of Maharajas and Queens of the Royal courts of Tripura in the migration and practice of Manipuri Culture into Tripura eventually leading to Rabindranath Tagore who was deeply impacted by its graceful movements during his visit. Different sources indicate that the early exposure of Manipuri dance getting national and international recognition can be dated back to the exchange of culture and patronage from the Royal Courts of Tripura to Shantiniketan. In Shantiniketan, Tagore adapted the movements of Manipuri Dance into Rabindra nritya and included Manipuri Dance into its curriculum. The study also highlights the importance of researching how various other classical dance forms have migrated and integrated within multiple socio-cultural settings which will help us to gain insightful information about their development between tradition and modernity.

Keywords: Manipuri Dance, Rabindranath Tagore, Royal Courts of Tripura, Migration, Socio-cultural hybridization

Research Paper

Introduction

Manipuri dance, one of India's eight classical dance forms, originated in the northeastern state of Manipur. Its origin can be traced back to ancient times, even before recorded history began. The dance form is famous for its seamless poetic movements, along with delicate and detailed hand movements. It revolves around Hindu themes, primarily "Krishna Bhakti," celebrating the pure and divine relationship between Lord Krishna and Radha. The dance is accompanied by a harmony of many instruments, like the flute, and many kinds of drums, among which the 'Pung' or Manipuri classical drum is the main classical instrument. The 'Pena', a stringed instrument, is used in Lai Haraoba, the earliest form of dance in Manipur (Singhajit Singh 44). The journey of Manipuri dance, starting from the secluded valleys of Manipur to the national stage, was significantly influenced by the Royal Courts of Tripura. The state of Tripura, which is culturally vibrant, has made significant contributions to the migration and hybridisation of the dance form, ensuring its survival and growth from regional bindings. The overall support by the Tripura Royalty was critical for the dance form to gain national and international recognition. The great poet Rabindranath Tagore (also referred to as 'Kabiguru') discovered this beautiful dance form in Tripura during the reign of Maharaja Rajdhar Manikya (1785-1804) and Manipuri King Bhagyachandra (1759-61 and 1763-1798) (Birmangal and Roy 135).

Rabindranath Tagore, belonging to a family that has a rich heritage in art, literature, music, and dance, developed a deep interest in various dance forms during his travels to Java, Bali, Thailand, China, Japan, and many other regions. His exposure to these diverse and beautiful cultures and their traditional dances gave him the enthusiasm and desire to create his creative dance form (Bandyopadhyay and Hironmoy 68). When Tagore established his school in Shantiniketan in 1901, the curriculum of the school included dance, music, and art, pioneering a holistic form of education in India. Tagore was so fond of the Manipuri dance that he requested Manipuri dance teachers from the Maharajas of Tripura to teach this dance form in Shantiniketan. During that period, only around 20 years had passed

since the introduction of the Western education system in India (Singh). Manipur, being encircled by nine rings of mountains, remained a separated land with the least external influence. There were no proper schools for systematic dance and music education. Rabindranath Tagore, appreciating and recognising the elegance and aesthetic value of the Manipuri dance form, introduced a separate section for it in Shantiniketan, a region outside Manipur (Mukhopadhyay 519). Over the past century, the administration of Shantiniketan has been appointing teachers to pass this gem on to the next generations, which resulted in its propagation through a plethora of students and instructors over the years.

Rabindranath Tagore's contribution to the migration and hybridization of Manipuri dance is unparalleled, and it won't be an exaggeration to say that during those times no one, even from the Manipur region, has made such significant efforts for the Manipuri dance to reach the national and global platform. The role of the Royal Courts of Tripura cannot be overstated in the process of preserving and promoting the dance form. This research cultivates the cultural exchanges, patronage, and key role played by Rabindranath Tagore and throws light on how the royal courts of Tripura and the royalty support helped the dance form get out of regional confines and make its place as a classical dance form of India.

Materials and Methods

This work, which uses a historical descriptive methodology, is primarily based on accessible published papers that have been bolstered by field research. Both quantitative and qualitative evaluations of the collected primary and secondary data were carried out where necessary.

Results and Discussion

Influence of Manipuri Dance in Rabindra Nritya

After the establishment of Shantiniketan in 1901, Rabindranath Tagore's desire and interest in developing a new, unique, and creative dance form resulted in the establishment of Rabindra nritya. Rabindranath Tagore, being a great poet, songwriter, and music composer himself, wanted a universal visual language to express the profound lyrical depths of his work. Hence Rabindra nritya evolved from the tradition of Rabindra sangeet, his very own compositions. Jorasanko, Rabindranath Tagore's ancestral home, marks the beginnings of his theatrical works, where his experimental works were influenced by European opera. His early productions like 'Balmiki Pratibha' and 'Mayar Khela' were popularly known as Geetinatya, or 'the song dramas'. By 1921, Rabindranath Tagore's love for dance resulted in dance being an integral component in his theatrical works, transitioning from simple and attractive songs to being a vital part of his dance dramas, or the "Nrityanatya." In his "Nrityanatyas," Tagore diligently assigned dance techniques that matched the nature of that particular character (Das 53). With its gentle, graceful, and exquisite motions, Manipuri dance was designated for feminine roles, while Kathakali was reserved for masculine roles. The decision served to further the overall expression of his theatrical performance by strengthening the emotional linkages between the verses of the dance tune. The 1926 dance drama "Natir puja" (the worship of the dancing girl), which was adapted from Tagore's poetry "Pujarini," is a notable illustration of this fusion. The show featured Manipuri dance under the direction of Ashrama master Nabakumar Singh. Productions such as "Barshamngal" and "Nataraj rituranga shala" depict the fusion of Manipuri dance skills with Tagore's poem, demonstrating how exquisitely the Manipuri dance enhanced the emerging dance style known as Rabindra nritya. Through this integration, Tagore not only enhanced the potential of the expression of his works but also added to the propagation, preservation, and evolution of the Manipuri dance form. His deep understanding of art's transcendent potential led him towards his journey of understanding the linguistic limitations in conveying universal emotions to discovering dance as a medium of expression (Ghosh 145). Tagore's urge to unite his literary works with music was with the intention of reaching a larger audience. However, he soon realised that the combination of music and literature also had its expressional bindings, which led him to explore dance, the undefeatable medium to express emotions through the universal language of movements. Tagores approach to dance was not simply experimental but also to find a universal medium to convey emotions to all kinds of audiences, breaking all cultural and linguistic barriers. It was Tagores encounter with Manipuri dance in Tripura in 1899 that increased his interest in dance. The 'Vanmahotsava' festival with its elegant and divine Manipuri dances was a pleasant experience for him. Back in those times, dance was stigmatised in society, but witnessing the art form of Manipuri dance, Tagore understood and felt within himself the potential of dance as a powerful mode of expression. This experience was life-changing and altered his perception of dance and its role in society. The beautiful setting of Tripura is described in his essay 'Tripuray Rabindra Smriti', which talks about Tagore being welcomed with a grand display

of Manipuri dance and him being impacted by it. This term marks Tagore's discovery of an understated yet amazing dance form to convey his literary themes with utmost effectiveness. He saw dance as a means of spiritual and emotional expression and firmly believed that the reputation of dance in our society would surely improve someday in the near future. He believed that dancing may serve as a vehicle to unite the individual and the universal, the material and the spiritual. Tagore's passion for dancing spanned nearly six decades, demonstrating his persistent search for means of communicating the human experience outside of linguistic and societal conventions. It was the time when he watched Rakhal Ras dance in Machimpur, where children danced to portray stories of child Krishna, that strengthened his belief that dance had immense educational and aesthetic values. It was then that he introduced the Manipuri dance as a formal subject to be taught in Shantiniketan, as he believed that it would be a means to introduce grace and discipline to the students of Shantiniketan. His introduction of Manipuri dance training in Shantiniketan was supported by Tripura's royal family (Chaudhuri 52). The collaboration with the Tripuri kings, especially the efforts of Birendrakishor Manikya, who sent Buddhamanta Singh to Shantiniketan, marks the cultural exchange. Both Tagore and the Tripura kings were admirers of art, so their relationship was not just a matter of cultural philanthropy but also a meeting of similar minds. The support from the Tripura kings encouraged Tagore's vision of integrating dance into the cultural and educational atmosphere of Shantiniketan. The collaboration with the Tripura kings enriched Rabindra Nritya and the cultural heritage of Bengal and even beyond that and also shaped Tagore's vision of dance being a powerful and dignified art form. Through Manipuri dance, Tagore found a medium that aligned with his philosophical quest to transcend linguistic and cultural barriers, creating a legacy that continues to inspire.

Introduction and Evolution of the Manipuri Dance in Tripura

The establishment of Manipuri dance in the royal courts of Tripura has its roots in the historical and cultural exchanges between the two regions. During the reign of Maharaja Rajdhar Manikya II (1785–1804), Manipuri culture started to be introduced to the royals of Tripura. This is also the period of tenure of Manipuri King Bhagya Chandra (1759–1798), who established the Raas dance, which later achieved the status of an Indian classical dance. The cultural exchange started with the marriage of Princess Harishwari of Manipur to Rajdhar Manikya II (Birmangal and Roy 138). The princess brought with her the dancers, musicians, and attendants who performed Maharaja's event in Tripura. Although there are no definite proofs of the Raasdhari, Sutradhari, and Gopis, the festival of Maharaas continues to be celebrated in the Radha Madhab temple in old Agartala.

The influence of Manipuri culture on Tripura's royalty became more prominent with further marital relations between the two regions. Rajdhar Manikya's sons, Ramganga Manikya and Kashichandra Manikya, were also influenced by the culture of Manipur (Goswami and Singha 73). Maharaja Krishna Kishore Manikya (1830–1849) married many more Manipuri princesses, which further strengthened Tripura's relationship with Manipur. It was Maharaja Krishnakishore Manikya who shifted the capital of Tripura to "New-Haveli," modern-day Agartala. The royal philanthropy continued under King Ishan Chandra Manikya (1850–1863). He married a Manipuri princess and settled their relatives in the new haveli, or the new capital of Tripura at that time. This is the period when Manipuri dance music and culture flourished in the royal courts of Tripura. Maharaja Bir Chandra Manikya (1862–1896) and Radha Kishore Manikya (1896–1923) were pioneers in adding the art form of Manipur into the cultural fabric of Tripura, organizing Raas Lila and other such festivals. Maharaja Birendra Kishore Manikya (1909–1923) gave the Manipuri dance and music new heights by blending the traditional aspects with experimental ideas. The Manipuri dance did not just stay confined to the royal court of Tripura but also became an integral part of Tripura society and its cultural heritage. Rabindranath Tagore's connection with Manipuri dance was also established in Tripura itself, with the help and collaboration of the Tripuri kings. Manipuri dance gurus like Rajkumar Buddhimanta Singh and Thakur Nabakumar Singh, who were related to the royal court of Tripura, later went on to become teachers at Tagore's Shantiniketan. The influence of Manipuri culture in Tripura was a result of many interstate marriages and also the deep interest of the Tripura kings in Manipuri art and culture. The integration of both cultures not only enriched Tripura's cultural heritage but also played an important role in the propagation and adding value to the Manipuri dance form and its preservation, as this dance form went on to receive the prestigious status of classical dance form in India.

Influence of Queens in the Royal Court of Tripura

The Manipuri princesses, who were married to the kings of Tripura, were the pioneers of the cultural exchange between the two states. They played a vital role in the propagation of Manipuri culture in Tripura, taking it close to the Tripura court and also society, creating a lasting impact. This cultural exchange was started when Princess Harisheshwari of Manipur was married to King Rajdhar Manikya II of Tripura (1785–1804). The princess brought with her some artists, which included dancers and musicians, which led to the introduction of the Maharaas festival in Tripura, which is still preserved and celebrated annually in the Radhamadhab temple of old Agartala. This period marked the origin of Manipuri cultural influence in Tripura, which further grew and evolved in the near future. The influence of Harisheshwari was further consolidated by her retinue and the cultural practices she brought to the royal courts of Tripura (Goswami and Singha 89; Birmangal and Roy 142). She made a prominent impact with the establishment of the Radhamadhab temple near the royal palace and the continuation of the Maharaas festival. As a result, the court's cultural activities were largely influenced by this cultural integration. The course of marrying Manipuri princesses by the kings of Tripura continued with Maharaja Krishnakishore Manikya (1830–1849), who married many Manipuri princesses, including Ratnamala. Later, Maharaja Ishan Chandra Manikya (1850–1863) also married several Manipuri princesses. These marriages not only strengthened relations between the two states but also encouraged the development of Manipuri culture in the royal courts of Tripura. The queens actively propagated their cultural heritage, including dance and music, influencing the cultural landscape of Tripura. Maharaja Bir Chandra Manikya (1863–1896) and Radha Kishore Manikya (1896–1909) were not only influenced by Manipuri culture, art, and dance but also were great supporters and protectors of the Manipuri culture. Raaslilas were organized, which included Manipuri dance forms. These measures taken by the royal family ensured the strengthening of Manipuri culture in Tripura. Maharaja Birendra Kishore Manikya (1909–1923) took prominent measures to promote Manipuri dance during his reign. His desire to blend traditional Manipuri practices with innovative and experimental ideas helped it reach a wider audience, adding more to its appeal. His steps, supported by the queens of Manipuri origin, helped in broader recognition of the dance form beyond the regional constraints.

The influence of Manipuri dance was further propagated by Rabindranath Tagore's encounter with the beautiful dance form (Chaudhuri 78). He was so taken aback by the beauty, elegance, and ability to express emotions that he decided to formally include Manipuri dance in the curriculum of his institute in Shantiniketan. The Tripura kings supported this initiative of Rabindranath Tagore to a large extent. They also sent teachers of Manipuri dance like Rajkumar Buddimanta Singh and Thakur Nabakumar Singh. They went on to become prominent gurus of Manipuri dance at Shantiniketan. This marked the far-reaching impact of the Tripura courts and especially the queens in propagating, preserving, and restoring the cultural asset of Manipur, the Manipuri dance.

The Global Hybridization of Manipuri Dance

The global hybridization of Manipuri dance began almost 100 years ago, with its traditions deeply rooted in the traditions of Manipur. This marked the start of the journey of the dance form to global recognition. In those times, Manipur had just been introduced to the Western mode of education, with no formal schools of dance or music. The region is largely separated from external influences by the nine rings of mountains, Manipur's peaceful environment facilitated its cultural practices to flourish. The Manipuri culture went beyond its regional confines with its propagation to the royal courts of Tripura. Tripura was a medium between Rabindranath Tagore and the Manipuri dance form. The relationship between the Tripura kings and Rabindranath Tagore played a crucial role in this cultural exchange. The treaties documented in "Rabindranath of Tripura" (Agartala, 1961) provide a clear account of this relationship. It was during Rabindranath Tagore's stay in Tripura, at the invitation of Maharaja Birendrakishore Manikya Bahadur, that he expressed his desire to introduce Manipuri dance as a formal subject to be taught in Shantiniketan, his educational institute. The king of Tripura then took the initiative to support the desire of Rabindranath Tagore by sending guru Buddhimanta Singh. The dance classes at Shantiniketan were initially referred to as 'exercises to drum rhythms' to avoid criticism. The later success of these classes led Tagore to request that the king of Tripura send Buddhimanta Singh's wife to teach the female students at Shantiniketan. Although guru Buddhimanta Singh eventually returned to his native state of Manipur and did not return to Shantiniketan, in

October 1925, guru Nabakumar Singh and his brother Baikuntha Singh were sent to Shantiniketan to continue the Manipuri dance teachings. This led to many significant performances of Manipuri Raaslila by the first batch of girl dancers in Shantiniketan. Such performances were staged at the invitation of Lord Lytton. Manipuri dance continued to occupy a special place in Shatiniketan; Tagore even sent Shantidev Ghosh to Imphal, the present-day capital of Manipur, to explore the depths of the art form even more. Though during the next couple of years, things faced retardation due to Rabindranath Tagore's death in 1941, the art form experienced a renewal when guru Arambam Amugi Singh started teaching Manipuri dance in full swing in 1957 onwards. His efforts made the art form a crucial part of Viswa Bharati, promoting its interest among the younger generation of students. The influence of Manipuri dance went beyond the boundaries of Shantiniketan, spreading further to Gujrat, where Nabakumar Singh taught, and eventually abroad to countries like the United States and Sri Lanka. Nabakumar Singha has played a pivotal role in consolidating the art form in Gujrat by establishing dance schools. In modern times, many institutes and universities in various states of India, like Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh, include Manipuri dance forms in their curricula. This popularity, validation, and recognition gained by the dance form is a result of the efforts of the royal family of Tripura and the great poet Rabindranath Tagore. Their countless efforts not only preserved the art form but also gave it world recognition.

Conclusion

The migration and evolution of Manipuri dance mark significant cultural progress that went beyond its classical origin. Initially confined within the state of Manipur, this dance form has advanced significantly, mostly as a result of cultural contacts made possible by significant historical figures like Rabindranath Tagore and the Maharajas of Tripura.

This systematic acceptance and integration of Manipuri dance into a diversified cultural platform have played an important role in its advancement. The development of Manipuri dance's official recognition and popularity outside of Manipur began with Tagore's introduction of the dance at Santiniketan and the gurus' subsequent efforts to teach it. Manipuri dance became more hybrid as a result of this cross-cultural interaction, which increased its popularity and impact.

The resulting hybridization, which extended to other classical dance forms in addition to Manipuri dance, demonstrated the broader implications of socio-cultural migration. This movement facilitated the spread of classical dance forms like Kathak, Kathakali, and Bharatnatyam into new areas. Moreover, the acceptance of Manipuri dance in Shantiniketan played a part in breaking down the taboos that surrounded dancing in the community at the time. It implied that dance could alter people's perceptions of it by evoking heavenly feelings and experiences in onlookers. This culture shift was especially beneficial to Bengali women, as it allowed them to come out of the shadows and get greater opportunities and respect by learning and performing dance.

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