Chapter IV.

THE MANIPURI SCHOOL

INTRODUCTION:

The Manipuri school of dance derives its name from Manipur, the region located in the eastern most part of India. It is a product of the old ritual dances and bears a marked influence of Vaishnavism. Every Manipuri is supposed to be a dancer and singer by birth. In ancient times people of Manipur had their own dance which were primarily of animistic nature. With the advent of Vaishnavism these dances were offered in homage to the worship of Śiva and Pārvati. For many centuries the Manipur dance was unknown to the people outside the Manipur region. At present there are two classes of people in Manipur, namely the 'Meitheis' and 'Visnupriyas', both being devoted to dance. The Manipuris claim themselves to be the descendant of the gandharvas. There is a famous legend in the Mahabharata connecting Bābruvahana and Arjuna with Manipur. These two heroes and the gandharvas are supposed to be the predecessors of the Manipuris. On the basis of another legend it is also said that Manipur was the place where lord Śiva and Pārvati once performed the Rasa Lila dance. The well-known Manipuri epic,

'Moirang Parba' describes the love episode of Khamba with Thaibi. It is said that Khamba was a poor young man of the Kshumal clan and Thaibi was a princess of Moirang dynasty. Both fell in love. They were put to ordeals, but were ultimately married. It so happened that once Thaibi hurled a lance towards Khamba mistaking him for somebody else. This resulted in Khamba's death. On noticing that she had killed her own lover and husband, she also killed herself with the same lance. Khamba and Thaibi are known in Assam for their dance which they used to perform. Their dances were known as 'Lai Haraoba' and were based on Rāsa Līlā of Śiva and Pārvatī. The Lai Haraoba is the oldest and traditional dance of Manipur and was performed by the Meitheis. Apart from the Lai Haraoba there were other dances, such as the 'Ougrihangel', the 'Thavalchongbi' and the Chingkheirol', which were practised by the Meitheis.

The Lai Haraoba dance festival is an annual feature in Assam and is celebrated in April or May in the village of Moirang. Mohan Khokar is of the view that the Lai Haraoba dance and the tragic love affair referred to above took place around 1074 A.D.

The Vaiṣṇava influence in Manipur came into prominence in the 18th century during the reign of Pamheiba, who was deeply influenced by Goswami Santidas Andhikari. Pamheiba adopted Vaiṣṇavism as his religion and ordered the people to follow it on pain of punishment. He even forbade the use of Meitheis language. Thus under his influence the Vaiṣṇava dances of Manipur came into existence. During the reign of Jai Singh, who ruled from 1764 to 1789 A.D., the Vaiṣṇava dances in Manipur developed. Parmanand Thakur, who was a follower of Chaitanya Mahāprabhu developed this dance in Manipur. These dances were performed in honour of lord Krishna. Jai Singh was himself a devotee of dance and the first Rasa Lila of the dance took place in 1769 A.D. in which Jai Singh's daughter Lairoibi participated as Radha. This type of Rasa Lila dance became so much popular that there were groups of dancers, who were attached to every temple in the entire region of Manipur. It continued to flourish in the Manipur State.

Mention may be made of the efforts made by Rabindranath Tagore to revive and revitalize this dance outside the Manipur State. It is said that poet Tagore

2. Ibid.
saw this dance in 1919 A.D. at Machimpur and thereafter he started its study at Shantiniketan. He got the old Manipuri dance simplified. Faubion Bowers has rightly observed:

"What became known as 'Manipur Dancing' was actually this Tagorean simplification and its latitude of interpretation. During the arid period of India's recent dance history, this Manipuri-cum-Tagore style swept the country. People responded to its soft, flowing, unintellectual, and restful style".

After poet Tagore's efforts, many dancers studied the dance and presented original Manipuri dance outside the State. Thus the present Manipuri dance is a type of the Rasa Lila based on the episodes of Radha Krishna. The Rasa Lila dance of Bengal which reached Manipur has amalgamated elements of the folk dances of Manipur. It is said that "every Manipuri girl, like the Balinese Belle, is a born dancer and a potential artist".

LAI HARAÖBA:

As has been said earlier 'Lai Haraoba' is a dance which portrays Siva Pārvati's Rasa Lila. Even before the legend connected this dance to this Rasa Lila, Lai Haraoba

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1. The Dance in India, 1953, page 105.
2. C. Venkatachalam, Dance in India, page 117.
was a religious dance intended to please the gods; and it was preserved as their old tribal dance. "Dancing among the Manipuris is like an amusement and a religious ceremony. The dances are entirely free from sensuous characteristics". There are two views with regard to the origin of Lai Haraoba. One view is that Lai Haraoba dance is devoid of all Indian tradition and it is a foreign dance. The other view is that Lai Haraoba, like any other ancient dance, has its roots in Bharata's Nāṭya Śāstra.

There cannot be any denying the fact that Nāṭya Śāstra had its influence on this dance. Lai Haraoba literally means the rejoicing of gods and goddesses. Sri E.N. Singh thus remarks: "The pre-historic period of Manipur proves the wide prevalence of Śaivism and Tantric Cults. On many a hill top there remain still the Śiva lingas, The Manipuri equivalent of god is Lai which is corrupted form of Linga". Faubion Bowers is of the view that the Fasa Lila, for which Śiva and Pārvati created Manipur, is the Lai Haraoba dance which is still performed annually.

4. The Dance in India, 1953, page 110.
Lai Haraoba dance is performed by all members of the village community in a group. It can also be performed in a duet, one male and female dancer. When it is performed in a group, the principal performers are always Maibas and Maibis, the male and the female servants of the temple respectively. E. Nilkanta Singh has connected the Maibis with the devadasis of South India. The Maibis dance, perhaps, in the spirit of self-forgetfulness, representing the ancient yearnings and dreams of centuries ago. But Bharata Muni’s Nātya Sāstra lives there in disguise, coloured by the regional hues.

Lai Haraoba dance festival which is celebrated during the spring season is a long drawn affair like Kathakali. Normally it takes about a month to celebrate the festival. When the festival starts, the village folk along with Maibis first visit the tank or the river and offer flowers to the water in order to summon the spirit of the gods. This is called 'Puspānjali' by Sri D. Mohan Nehru. The Maibas offer some gold or silver to the water. The Maibis then start shivering their bodies and then the procession returns along with two pitchers filled with flowers. The pitchers are opened by the Maibis and then they

start dancing with hand gestures and soft movements. After this initial beginning, it is believed that the gods and goddesses have arrived and thereafter the whole procession starts dancing softly suggesting the birth of a child and the various stages of creation of life with the help of hand-gestures and movements of the body. The dance then progresses to suggest that a house is being built. The dance describes that the god (or the lord Śiva) comes out of the house to meet goddess Pārvati. Both meet each other and indulge in amorous gestures, dominated by the erotic sentiment (Śringāra rasa), interspersed with songs. After this the Lai Haraoba depicts that both the god and goddess have gone to a hill and there thus grow cotton. All these stages of growing cotton right up to the weaving of cloth are minutely described. This portion of the dance bears a clear influence of the Nātya Śāstra. Maibis then dance fishing sequence and other such sports. This programme continues for several days.

Lai Haraoba dance is thus mainly abhinaya and it has assumed varieties. One variety emphasizes the Tāṇḍava aspect, the other the Lasya aspect and so on. When Lai

1. Lord Śiva is known as God Nong-Pokningthou and Goddess Pārvati is known as Panthoibi in Manipur.

Haraoba dance is performed as a duet by a male and a female dancer, it is supposed that they are Khamba and Thaibi, the famous lovers who were supposed to be incarnation of Śiva and Pārvati. This variety emphasises more on Nṛtta than Nritya.

Lai Haraoba has its characteristic music. The instruments used are a drum known as 'Khol and a 'Pena Khomba', that is a single stringed instrument which is played like a violin. Bells are also tied around this instrument. Pena is an ancient and traditional Manipur instrument. Faubion Bowers is of the view that Lai Haraobā is the oldest form of dance in Manipur and it forms the basis of all Manipuri dancing. "Lai Haraoba festival of Manipur represents what is finest and best of the ancient Manipuri culture." Manipuri devdāsis are dedicated to lord Śiva and if one witness the dance of Maibis, he is bound to feel the influence of Nātya Śāstra. No classical dance of India, as practised today can claim to be based entirely on the Nātya Śāstra. Local influences have played their own part. The Manipuri dance is no

2. Ibid., page 123.
exception. This dance is noted for its traditional restrained, sub-due movements and eloquent silence. It represents the very soul of Manipuri culture.

RĀṢĀ LĪLĀ:

Rāṣā Līlā, as performed in Manipur, is unique in certain respects. It is generally played in a particular season on the mountains or in far off temples. It is a dance drama full of religious and pious devotion. It is therefore performed only at sacred places and the Vaiṣṇavite Hindus only are allowed to participate in it. Those who witness it must keep themselves standing at a distance. Generally Rāṣā Līlā begins after mid-night and continues up to the sunrise. It is believed that lord Krishna revealed his mystic Rāṣa dance to Karta Maharaj of Manipur and his daughter princess Laimalairobib was the first to dance the role of Rādhā at the temple of Govind ji built in Imphal by Karta Maharaj.

The Rāṣā Līlā conveys to the mind the idea of ecstatic love and activities indulged in thousands of years ago by lord Krishna with Rādhā and the Gopis at Brindaban garden. What is note-worthy about Rāṣā Līlā

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is the devotion and piety with which it is performed. As has been observed earlier, this type of dancing came to Manipur along with Vaiṣṇava influence and therefore the Vaiṣṇava Rāṣa Līlā is based on the Gauḍiya scriptures mostly written in Bengal. Maharaja Bhagya Chandra himself composed Govindasangeetaleelā Vilāsa and he drew inspiration from the Gauḍiya scriptures. It can not be doubted that it was largely based on Sanskrit texts and the Purāṇas. The Purāṇas like Harivamśa, Viṣṇu and Bhagavata contain a graphic description of the Rāṣa Līlā, so also the works of such Gauḍiya writers as Rupa, Sanatana have written on the Rāṣa Līlā.

In the region of Braja during the Mughal supremacy, a particular style of Rāṣa was developed which can well be compared with that of Manipur. Of course Rāṣa Līlā exhibits some influence of the ancient Lai Haraoba dance but there is no doubt that it contains some original ingredients.

Since the people of Manipur regard Rāṣa Līlā as highly pious and sacred, they are reluctant to discuss it in public and this sometimes creates difficulties in ascertaining its exact nature. "Orthodox Manipuris - - - - - - look to its heroine and hero, Rādhā and Krishna, as a personal husband or wife, intimate and private".

However, it is said that six different varieties of Rāsa Līlā are performed in Manipur and these varieties are celebrated on different occasions:

I. MAHĀRĀSA:

It is performed on the full-moon day of Kartika every year. It is based on the Bhagvata Purāṇa and has largely been drawn from Rasapanchadhyayi. The legend goes to say that on an appointed day lord Krishna fulfilled his promise of coming to Rādhā and Gopīs to dance with them. Rādhā and the Gopīs after dancing with lord Krishna felt very proud and boasted of their lot. Lord Krishna then disappeared and after a great deal of search and weeping by Rādhā and the Gopīs, he appeared again not as one person but as many Krishnas as the Gopīs. All of them then performed the Rāsa. This story is given effect to in the Mahārāsa.

II. VASANTA RĀSA:

It is performed on Chaitra Purnamāsi (full moon day). In this dance Krishna and Rādhā along with the gopas and gopis come out in a group to play Holi. Rādhā is disturbed by seeing lord Krishna exclusively dancing with Chandravali and leaves the dance in protest and despair. Lord Krishna seeing her angry, comes to Rādhā. Rādhā first refuses to dance with him but on persuasion by Krishna agrees to do it. And then the whole group dances in joy and rapture.
III. KUNJARĀSA:

It is performed on every eighth day of the month of Āśvin. This is the most intimate type among all the Rāsa Lilās. In this dance lord Krishna and Rādhā go to a kunja or brake with few selected companions after performing introductory dance and Rāsa in a large group. When lord Krishna and Rādhā reach the Kunja, there they again dance in esctacy.

IV. NITYA RĀSA:

This variety of Rāsa Lila, as the name suggests can be performed on any occasion and on any day. It is a later addition in the list of Rāsa Līlās to enable the people to celebrate them at any time they feel like rejoicing it. Only Abhisara and Rāsa are performed in this dance.

All the above four varieties of Rāsa Lila have one common feature viz. that both men and women (Krishna, Rādhā, gopas and gopis) participate in it. They are similar in the sense that lord Krishna first meets Rādhā and then either he disappears or Rādhā leaves and then the others beg forgiveness; both again reunite and the whole group dances with joy. In all these four varieties, the Rāsa Lila ends on the request of Krishna, when he asks Rādhā and gopis to return to their homes.

The other two remaining varieties of Rāsa Lila namely 'Goparasa' and Ulukhalarasa' are performed by gopas
alone and in these Lilas Krishna engages himself in sport along with other gopas.

V. GOPA RĀSA (Goṣṭha):

It is usually danced in the month of Kartika. The story or the legend is that lord Krishna with his elder brother Balrāma and the gopas goes to a jungle along with cows. There they engage themselves in playing with a ball. After some time they go to a garden which is ruled by Dhenukāsura, the demon. Balrāma ultimately kills the demon. Later on another demon Bakasur comes on the scene and he is killed by lord Krishna. All of them then dance and rejoice at their victory over the evil spirits.

VI. ULUKHALA RĀSA:

It is also performed in the month of Kartik and usually the stories relating to the childhood of lord Krishna are danced; for example, stealing of butter by lord Krishna, teasing of gopis etc.

These Rāsa Lilas when danced in a group present a spectacle. When the dancers only use claps to beat the rhythms, these Rāsa Lilas are known of the Talarasaka variety. When sticks are used to beat the rhythm it is known as Dandrasaka variety. When the group dances in a circle, they dance in Mandalarasaka variety. In these Rāsa Lilas all these elements of dance, i.e., Nritta,
Nritya and Nātya are "aesthetically incorporated in composing a Rāsa Līlā". The music which accompanies the Rāsa Līla is classical and it is accompanied with such instruments as flute, the conch, the esraj, cymbals and the Khol. The songs are classics adopted from the works of such famous poets as Jayadeva, Vidyāpati, Chandidāsa, Govindadāsa and others. The songs are either sung in Sanskrit or in Meitei languages. The costume is attractive and dignified. These Rāsa Līlās are usually performed near temples at a place with the Mandapa provided for the Rāsa. The Mandapa is surrounded by pillars. It is called Nāta-Mandapa or Ranga-Sthala which is decorated with flowers, leaves and creepers. At the beginning of the Rāsa Līla, the priest of the temple offers a puja, which symbolises the dedication of Rāsa Līlā to Govinda ji (Śri Krishna). The priest recites at first the slokas or stutis. Then the musicians play on instruments and start singing in slow and soft tempo. Rāsa Līlā then begins "The men and women of long and arduous discipline of body, and fired by devotion to lord Krishna and Rādhā, perform Rāsa Līlas. They literally dance away the fleeting watches of the night, uplifting their spectators to a mood of religious π.

ecstasy where the space ceases to matter and the time stands still."

Apart from these six varieties of the traditional Rāsa Līlās, the efforts of Ravindra Nath Tagore have brought out a mixed variety of Rāsa Līlā. Poet Tagore initiated a simplified form of Manipuri dancing at Shāntiniketan. Shāntideva Ghosh is of the view that poet Tagore composed the drama 'Nātur Puja' and all the girls at Shāntiniketan who were trained in Manipuri dancing participated in it. Its initial success inspired poet Tagore to write other dance-dramas such as 'Rituranga', 'Nataraja' and Shāntiniketan in course of time produced famous ballets 'Chitrangada', 'Shvama', 'Chandalika' and 'Mayar-khela'. The efforts of Tagore have resulted in widespread popularization of Manipuri dances outside Assam but the simplification and alterations have changed the orthodox Manipuri style. A person who has seen the original orthodox Manipuri Rāsa Līlā and has also witnessed the light ballet of Tagore based on Manipuri dancing, is bound to feel that the Rāsa Līlā of Manipur has no parallel either at Shāntiniketan or at any other place.

SANKIRTANA AND CHOLOMS:

The considerable impact of the Vaiṣṇavite traditions on Manipur is recognised beyond doubt. This influence is mainly due to the great Vaiṣṇavite leader Chaitanya Mahāprabhu. Community prayer or Sankirtana thus occupies a prominent place in the modes of religious expression. In these prayers, people, who participate, use drum or khol and cymbals which they beat according to rhythm and tāla against each other and the prayer is sung according to the tāla. Mostly Sankirtanas are performed either in the beginning or at the end of the Rāsa Lilas. Cholom is known as Cymbal and Drum Dance, i.e. when majority of persons are using Cymbals, it is known as Kartal Cholom and when Khols are used by most of them it is called Pung Cholom. The Pung Cholom or the Drum dance is unparalleled in the sense that the dancers play on the drum or khol while they are dancing. "Pung Cholom is also performed in large groups and is more exuberant and by virtue of a wonderful instrument it has a greater variety in body movements and steps creating a mood of joyousness and festivity." The effort is to create or reproduce the

1. See Faubion Bowers, The Dance in India, 1953, page 123.
2. Ibid., page 127.
songs by 'Bolas' in the drum and then to suggest the same through the movement of the body. They are thus a sort of community dance and are distinct from Rāsa Lila.

Manipuri dance, like any other school of dancing in India, recognizes the three main aspects of dance, that is the Nrītta, the Nrītya and Nātya. It also divides dance into two well known Śāstric categories: Lasya and Tāndava. No doubt, in a complete dance, both Lasya and Tāndava must be emphasized and they are complimentary to each other. In the Manipuri Lasya the chief characteristics are the movements of feet; the knees are closed so far as it is possible; the hips are moved vertically rather than horizontally. Similarly the rest of the body is also moved vertically. Hands never go over the head or below knees and the eyes follow the movements of the hands and so the neck and the head also move in the same direction. In Lasya, the movements are soft and delicate and "no part of the body should be stretched to its extreme possibility". Since all Manipuri dancing is accompanied with singing, each dance sequence is set to the song. In Lasya the tempo of the song is slow and the movements are soft, while in Tāndava the tempo or Lasya is medium or fast and the movements are bold. In both the cases the Mridanga or the Khol follows the song and translates the rhythm of

spoken words. The recognition of Nritya, Nritta and Nātya and the division of dance as Lasya and Tāndava leads to the inevitable conclusion that Manipuri dancing too is based on Bharata's Nātya Śāstra; of course with its additional local characteristics.

Since Rāsa is the chief type of the dance which is performed in Lai Haraoba as well as in Rāsa Līla, it is needless to say that expression or Bhāva has a vital role. The hand gestures are also vitally important to express inner feelings and sentiments. The relevant Śāstras have elaborately described the different hand-gestures and expressions with their respective meanings. The abhinaya or the Nātya element in the Manipuri dancing is set to be based on the Śāstric texts. The Bhakti Bhāva (devotion) occupies the chief place in Manipuri dancing. This Bhakti is one of the nine emotions recognised by Bharata in his Nātya Śāstra. Since in Lai Haraoba and in Rāsa Līlā, the major part of the dance is Rāsa, Śringāra or the sentiment of love predominates. This sentiment of love is either expressed in the feeling of separation (viyoga) or in the feeling of union (samyoga). In this respect there is no difference between the Nātya Śāstra and the Manipuri dancing. "Innumerable episodes from Purānas and Epics are associated with Manipur and its dancing, which perpetuate and substantiate this belief".

Faubion Bowers has rightly observed about this dance in the following words: "Dance in Manipur is kept within an overall proportion. The guiding spirit is religion, and the body and its movements are the highest dedication of the human being to his gods. — — — — Manipuris say that religion without physical culture is no religion. As for the dance; according to them it is physical culture made most 'Ornamental' and all for the glory of the gods".

1. Faubion Bowers, The Dance in India, 1958, page 147.