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The Cultural Background of Manipuri Dance: A Socio-Historical Exploration

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Abstract: Manipuri dance, one of India's eight classical dance forms, is deeply rooted in the cultural, mythological, and socio-religious fabric of Manipur, a northeastern state of India. This dance tradition, shaped by regional festivals, religious practices, and historical events, has evolved over centuries. Its distinct characteristics, particularly its spiritual connections, make it a significant component of the Manipuri people's cultural identity. Beyond being an art form, Manipuri dance reflects the community's religious and social dynamics. The main objective of this paper is to explore the cultural, mythological, and festival-based contexts that have contributed to the development and preservation of Manipuri dance. By examining these factors, the study seeks to understand how Manipuri dance evolved into one of India's classical dance forms. Despite its rich history, the relationship between Manipuri dance and the socio-cultural contexts that shaped it remains underexplored. This paper addresses this gap, focusing on the influence of mythology, rituals, and festivals, as well as the dance's role in preserving the socio-religious life of the region. The study adopts a qualitative research methodology, relying on literature reviews, field observations, and analysis of historical texts and cultural documents. Key sources include scholarly articles, books, and interviews with practitioners and experts of Manipuri dance. This research provides significant academic value by deepening the understanding of the cultural and mythological foundations of Manipuri dance, thus enhancing its appreciation within the broader context of Indian performing arts. The findings highlight that Manipuri dance has been shaped by its geographical isolation, religious practices, and festival culture. Rituals and the influence of Vaishnavism have played central roles in its evolution. Ultimately, Manipuri dance stands as both an artistic expression and a spiritual reflection of the Manipuri people, remaining a vibrant aspect of India's classical dance heritage.

Key Words: Manipuri Dance, Classical Dance Tradition, Mythology, Socio-Cultural Context, Vaishnavism.

1. Introduction

Manipuri dance is more than just an artistic expression; it is a living, breathing reflection of the culture, spirituality, and traditions of Manipur. Rooted in the region's ancient mythology, the dance form reflects the interplay between divine forces and the natural world, symbolizing the eternal struggle between creation and destruction. The rich myths surrounding the origins of Manipuri dance, such as the cosmic dance of the goddess *Nongthangleima*, not only tell of

the divine intervention in creation but also highlight the significance of dance as a medium for invoking peace, harmony, and balance in the universe.

The dance is intricately woven into the fabric of Manipuri society, with its practice and preservation being a communal responsibility. It is a vital part of religious festivals, rituals, and ceremonies, where it is performed to honor deities and connect the human realm with the divine. The vibrant festivals of Manipur, such as *Lai Haraoba*, *Ratha Yatra*, and *Heikru Hidongba*, provide a stage for the performance of Manipuri dance, showcasing its symbolic role in spiritual offerings and societal cohesion. These dances, with their graceful movements and evocative expressions, convey deep philosophical teachings and embody values such as devotion, sacrifice, and the interconnectedness of all beings.

Moreover, Manipuri dance serves as a vehicle for the transmission of cultural knowledge, not just within the local community but also beyond the state's borders. It is a medium through which generations have passed down stories, traditions, and religious practices. The preservation of this dance form is a testament to the resilience of Manipuri culture, which has withstood the test of time, colonial interference, and globalization. Through its continued practice and appreciation, Manipuri dance stands as a symbol of cultural pride and a bridge between the past and the future, ensuring that the essence of Manipur's rich heritage is carried forward for generations to come.

Thus, understanding the background of Manipuri dance is essential for appreciating its multifaceted significance. It is not just an art form; it is a cultural repository that holds within it the collective history, beliefs, and identity of the Manipuri people.

Objectives:

1. To examine the cultural, mythological, and festival-based contexts that have influenced the development and preservation of Manipuri dance.
2. To analyze the impact of religious practices, particularly Vaishnavism, on the evolution of Manipuri dance and its role in reflecting the socio-religious life of the Manipuri community.

Significance:

This study is significant for several reasons. First, it fills the gap in scholarly research regarding the interplay between Manipuri dance and its socio-cultural contexts, particularly the influence of mythology, rituals, and festivals. By examining how these elements shape and sustain the tradition, the research enhances appreciation for Manipuri dance as a living art form that not only showcases aesthetic qualities but also serves as a spiritual and cultural expression of the Manipuri people. Additionally, this study contributes to the academic understanding of Indian classical dance traditions, highlighting the unique role of Manipuri dance in the broader landscape of performing arts. Finally, the research emphasizes the importance of preserving this rich cultural heritage and ensuring its continued relevance in contemporary times.

2. Research Methodology:

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology to explore the cultural, mythological, and festival-based contexts that have shaped Manipuri dance. The research is based on the following methods:

- Literature Review:** The study begins with a comprehensive review of existing scholarly articles, books, and historical texts to understand the evolution, cultural significance, and socio-religious influences on Manipuri dance. Sources include both primary and secondary texts, such as academic journals and documented interviews with practitioners and experts in the field of Manipuri dance.
- Field Observations:** Direct observations of Manipuri dance performances, festivals, and rituals are conducted to gain a deeper insight into the dance's role within its community. Field visits to Manipur and other regions where Manipuri dance is practiced allow for firsthand understanding of how the dance is performed, transmitted, and celebrated.
- Interviews:** Semi-structured interviews with Manipuri dance practitioners, scholars, and cultural experts are conducted. These interviews help gather qualitative data on the dance's evolution, its connection to religious practices, and its cultural significance. The insights from these experts enrich the study and provide a contemporary perspective on the dance tradition.
- Analysis of Cultural Documents:** The study also includes an analysis of cultural and historical documents that discuss the mythology, rituals, and festivals linked to Manipuri dance, such as the *Lai Haraoba* festival and the influence of Vaishnavism. These documents provide a historical context and outline the dance's role in the religious and social life of the region.

By combining literature review, field observations, interviews, and the analysis of cultural documents, this methodology ensures a well-rounded exploration of the various factors that have contributed to the development and preservation of Manipuri dance.

3. Result and Discussion

2.1 Geographical and Historical Context

Situated in the northeastern-most corner of India, Manipur shares borders with Nagaland, Mizoram, Assam, and Myanmar (Devi, O. S., 2022). The topography of the region—encompassed by the Eastern Himalayas, hills, valleys, and lakes—has contributed to the preservation of its distinct cultural practices (Biswas, 2008). This geographic isolation allowed indigenous traditions to flourish while also accommodating selective external influences.

Historically, Manipur existed as an independent kingdom under several names such as *Poirei-Lam*, *Sanna-Leipak*, *Meitei-Leipak*, and *Kangleipak* (Bandopadhyay, 2010). The name “Manipur,” meaning “land of jewels,” may have originated following the arrival of Brahmins and the institutionalization of Hinduism (Bhogeswari, 1992).

2.2 Socio-Economic and Cultural Life

Agriculture has long been the backbone of the Manipuri economy, with the majority of the population engaged in farming activities. This primary occupation is complemented by other economic pursuits such as fishing, weaving, and handicrafts, which have become integral to the region's socio-economic fabric. Weaving, in particular, holds great significance in Manipuri society, and the loom is a ubiquitous presence in many households, especially among women. This widespread engagement with textile traditions highlights the importance of weaving not only as an economic activity but also as a cultural expression (Bhubol, 2023). Additionally, the artisan community contributes to the region's rich cultural heritage through the creation of wood carvings, pottery, and reed-based crafts, all of which reflect the intricate craftsmanship and creativity of the Manipuri people.

The social structure of Manipuri society places great value on the role of women, who are highly esteemed and play a central part in preserving and nurturing traditional values. Both men and women contribute equally to the transmission of cultural practices, ensuring the continuity of Manipuri traditions. The religious life in Manipur is predominantly influenced by Vaishnavism, which is the dominant religious philosophy of the region. However, the indigenous Meitei religion, known as *Sanamahism*, continues to be practiced widely, particularly in the rural areas. *Sanamahism* is deeply embedded in the cultural fabric of the Manipuri people, and every household is typically home to a sacred space dedicated to the worship of God *Sanamahi*, the guardian deity of the family (Singh, Y. B., 2022).

2.3 Mythological Origins of Manipuri Dance

The mythological origins of Manipuri dance are deeply rooted in the cosmic creation narrative, which involves the Supreme God *Kuru Sidaba* and his two sons, *Ashiba* and *Haraba*. According to the legend, to prevent *Haraba* from causing chaos and disrupting the process of creation, the goddess *Nongthangleima* performed a captivating and powerful dance. Her mesmerizing movements subdued *Haraba*'s disruptive forces, allowing *Ashiba* to proceed with the formation of the Earth. This dance is not only regarded as the first feminine dance form in Manipuri tradition but is also intricately connected to the martial art of *Thang-Ta*, highlighting the

fusion of artistic expression and martial discipline in Manipuri culture (Singh, Y. B., 2022)

2.4 Festivals and Dance Forms

Religious festivals in Manipur serve as the backdrop for the development and continuation of its dance forms. The oldest festival, *Lai Haraoba* (Pleasing of the Gods), showcases a wide range of ritualistic and celebratory dances such as *Laihou Jagoi*, *Khuruklei Jagoi*, *Laiching Jagoi*, *Thang Jagoi*, and *Thabal Chongba* (Parret & Parret, 1997).

There are four main types of *Lai Haraoba*: *Kanglei*, *Moirang*, *Chakpa*, and *Kakching*. These are associated with over 365 forest deities (*Umanag Lais*), of which 166 are worshipped in the valley (Devi, K. A., 2005).

Manipur is often referred to as the land of festivals and dances. Other significant festivals include:

The cultural heritage of Manipur is profoundly enriched by its traditional dance forms, which serve as living expressions of the region's historical legacy and religious ethos. At the heart of Manipuri dance lies the influence of various indigenous festivals that reflect the spiritual and communal life of its people. Celebrations such as *Lai Haraoba*, *Ratha Yatra*, *Heikru Hidongba*, *Kwak Jatra*, *Ukai Kappa*, *Chingoi Iruppa*, and *Sajibu Cheiraoba* have played a formative role in shaping and sustaining the dance traditions of the region.

One of the most prominent festivals is *Ratha Yatra*, locally referred to as *Kang* or *Kang Chingba*, primarily observed by the Meitei community. This vibrant celebration spans eight days and parallels the famous *Ratha Yatra* of *Puri*, commemorating the chariot procession of Lord *Jagannath*, accompanied by his siblings *Subhadra* and *Balabhadra*. The term 'Kang' is derived from the Manipuri word for the cart used in the procession, which is a massive structure mounted on six iron wheels and pulled by thousands of devotees. (01st July 2022, Observation of *Ratha Yatra* at Sri Govindajee Temple, Imphal).

Another significant celebration is *Kwaak Taanba*, also known as *Kwaak Jatra* or *Loidam Kumsaba*. This ancient festival features a symbolic event where the King of Manipur releases a crow as part of a ritual observance. Celebrated on the 10th *lunar* day of *Mera* in the Meitei calendar, the event includes elaborate ceremonies and traditional performances held at the *Sana Konung*, the Royal Palace in Imphal, contributing to the rich cultural tapestry of the region (Bhubol, 2023).

Heikru Hidongba is a notable socio-religious festival characterized by a ceremonial boat race. Held annually at the moat of *Sagolband Bijoy Govinda Leikai*, it symbolizes harmony and religious devotion. Originally performed at *Bijoy Govinda*'s moat, the rituals culminate in the installation of the deity in a newly built temple (Observation on 06th September 2022).

The *Ukai Kappa* festival stands out with its symbolic act of crafting human figures and shooting arrows, embodying the fusion of ritual and performative art (Bomani, 2017, p. 236). Similarly, *Chingoi*

Iruppa is celebrated with *Sanamahi* rituals and river bathing, offering further insight into the spiritual undercurrents influencing Manipuri culture. *Sajibu Cheiraoba*, which marks the Manipuri New Year, infuses dance practices with themes of renewal and seasonal transition (Singh K. C., 1994, p. 6).

Complementing these are community-driven festivals like *Thabal Chongba* and *Mera Hauchongba*. *Thabal Chongba* fosters social unity through communal dance events, often held during festive evenings (22nd March 2022, Observation at Singjamei, Imphal). *Mera Hauchongba*, on the other hand, symbolizes inter-community solidarity and features dynamic performances involving traditional weapons like swords and spears.

These festivals not only provide occasions for celebration but also act as vital sources of inspiration for the evolution, preservation, and performance of Manipuri dance. They influence thematic choices, movement vocabulary, and symbolic expression within dance forms. The rich interplay between festival rituals and dance practices underscores a cultural narrative that continues to shape the identity of Manipur. Beyond those mentioned, the region is home to many more festivals that contribute to the vibrant and diverse cultural landscape of Manipuri tradition.

2.5 Classical Raas Tradition

The classical dance tradition of Manipur, known as Manipuri *Raas Leela*, emerged prominently during the 18th century, particularly with the formalization of the *Raas Leelas* in the region situated in the northeastern part of India. This tradition stands as one of the principal classical dance forms of India, deeply rooted in the devotional narratives surrounding Lord Krishna. The five primary *Raas Leelas* include:

- a) *Maha Raas*,
- b) *Basanta Raas*,
- c) *Kunja Raas*,
- d) *Nitya Raas*, and
- e) *Diva Raas*.

Among these, the *Maha Raas* is regarded as the most significant and spiritually elevated form. It reflects the distinctive cultural identity of Manipur, intertwining the metaphysical episodes of *Krishna*, *Srimati Radhika*, and the *Gopis* with the indigenous aesthetics and values of the region. Due to its refined spiritual symbolism and artistic integrity, the *Maha Raas* has contributed to Manipuri dance being recognized as one of the eight major classical dance traditions of India (Singh, P. I., 2023).

The genesis of Manipuri dance, however, predates the *Raas Leelas* and can be traced back to indigenous rituals like *Lai Haraoba*, which reflects ancient pre-Vaishnavite practices. The term *Jagoi* (meaning dance in Manipuri) is believed to be derived from *Chukoi* or *Chatkoi*, a ritualistic dance form performed by *Maibis* (priestesses) within the *Sanamahi* religious tradition. Over time, various dance styles evolved, such as *Chukpharon Jagoi*, *Khamba-Thoibi Jagoi*, *Laiching Jagoi*, *Laihou Jagoi*, *Leima Jagoi*, *Leisem Jagoi*, *Maibi Jagoi*, *Panthoibi Jagoi*, *Ras Jagoi*, *Thougal Jagoi*, and the tribal *Hao Jagois*—each contributing to the richness of Manipuri performance traditions.

The development of Manipuri *Raas* as a classical form was significantly influenced by the introduction and spread of Vaishnavism in Manipur. This transformation began during the reigns of rulers such as *King Kyamba* (1467–1508), *King Khagembra* (1597–1652), *King Charairongba* (1697–1709), and *King Pamheiba* (1709–1748), eventually reaching its zenith during the rule of King *Jay Singh* (Bhagyachandra) between 1759 and 1797. During this period, elements from indigenous practices such as *Lai Haraoba*, including martial arts like *Thang-Ta* (sword and spear combat), were synthesized into the structure of *Raas Leela*, *Pung Cholom* (drum dancing), and *Sankirtana* (devotional music and dance). Scholars thus argue that a comprehensive understanding of *Raas* and *Sankirtana* is incomplete without a deep appreciation of *Lai Haraoba* and *Thang-Ta* (Bhubol, 2023).

The colonial period brought significant changes. Following Manipur's annexation by the British in 1891, classical Manipuri dance experienced a period of decline, although it continued to survive in temple environments. A turning point came with the involvement of Rabindranath Tagore, who was deeply moved by a performance of *Raas Leela*. Inspired, he integrated Manipuri dance into the curriculum at *Shantiniketan*, thereby introducing this sacred art form to audiences beyond Manipur (Lakhpatti, 2023).

In the early 20th century, national efforts to revive India's classical heritage gained momentum. One key development was the appointment of *Guru Amubi Singh* by *Uday Shankar* to teach Manipuri dance at his centre in *Almora*. This initiative contributed to further popularization of Manipuri dance across India. *Guru Amubi Singh's* experiences led him to choreograph celebrated compositions, including pieces inspired by *Jayadeva's Geeta Govinda* and other solo works such as *Dasavatara Nirtya* (Chaliha, 2015, pp. 46, 92). He played a critical role in adapting sacred temple dances for public stage performance, thereby preserving the tradition while also expanding its reach and impact.

2.6 Folk and Ritual Dance Forms

Manipuri dance is characterized by a rich vocabulary of movements that include various ritualistic and folk dance forms, each of which holds a unique significance in both religious and social contexts. Among the most prominent of these are *Maibi Jagoi*, *Panthoibi Jagoi*, *Chukpharon Jagoi*, *Khamba-Thoibi Jagoi*, and *Hao Jagois*, all of which contribute to the diversity and depth of Manipuri dance traditions.

Maibi Jagoi is a sacred dance performed by priestesses known as *Maibi* during religious ceremonies, particularly in the context of *Sanamahism*, the indigenous belief system of the Manipuri people. These dances are highly ritualistic and are believed to invoke the blessings of the gods and ancestors. The *Maibi* dances hold great cultural and spiritual significance, representing a deep connection between the human and divine realms. The movements are graceful, symbolic, and filled with intricate gestures that convey the devotion and reverence of the performers (Bhubol, 2023).

Panthoibi Jagoi, on the other hand, is a devotional dance dedicated to *Panthoibi*, the goddess of fertility, love, and war in Manipuri mythology. The dance form portrays the feminine strength and grace associated with the goddess and is performed to honor her. The movements in *Panthoibi Jagoi* are graceful and powerful,

symbolizing both the nurturing and protective aspects of the goddess. This dance form not only embodies the religious fervor of the Manipuri people but also speaks to their reverence for feminine divinity in their cultural ethos (Singh, 1994).

Chukpharon Jagoi is another important ritualistic dance that is part of Manipuri dance vocabulary. Performed during rituals invoking deities and natural forces, this dance is often associated with agricultural rites and the changing seasons. The *Chukpharon Jagoi* involves intricate footwork and symbolic movements that reflect the Manipuri people's connection with nature and their reverence for the elements that sustain life. The dance is not just a form of worship, but also a representation of the cyclical nature of life, growth, and renewal (Bhubol, 2023).

The *Khamba-Thoibi Jagoi* is a narrative dance that depicts the famous love story of *Khamba* and *Thoibi*, a legendary couple from Manipuri folklore. This dance form combines elements of romance, heroism, and tragedy, illustrating the cultural importance of storytelling through movement. The dance is performed by two primary dancers, representing the protagonists, and often includes dramatic expressions and graceful movements that convey the emotions of love, longing, and conflict. Through *Khamba-Thoibi Jagoi*, Manipuri dance preserves the region's rich storytelling traditions while also conveying its historical and social values (Chaliha, 2015).

Hao Jagois, a category that encompasses tribal dances, represents the various indigenous communities of Manipur. These dances reflect the diverse customs, beliefs, and lifestyles of the different tribal groups in the region. *Hao Jagois* are often performed during communal gatherings, festivals, and rites of passage, celebrating the close relationship between the people and their environment. The dances are characterized by vigorous movements, rhythmic drumming, and vibrant costumes, making them a vivid expression of the tribal communities' identity and heritage (Bomani, 2017).

Together, these diverse dance forms form a vital part of the Manipuri dance tradition, serving not only as expressions of religious devotion but also as living records of the socio-cultural landscape of Manipur. Each dance style offers a unique window into the region's beliefs, practices, and history, with movements and gestures that continue to preserve the cultural essence of the Manipuri people. Through these dances, the rich traditions of Manipuri society are passed down from one generation to the next, ensuring the continued vitality and relevance of this ancient art form.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the study of the cultural and historical context of Manipur, particularly its dance traditions, reveals a rich tapestry of religious, social, and historical influences that have shaped its unique identity. From the geographic isolation of the region to the complex religious beliefs and festivals, each aspect contributes to the preservation and development of Manipuri dance forms. The fusion of indigenous traditions, mythological narratives, and external influences, such as Vaishnavism, has allowed Manipuri dance to evolve into a vibrant and dynamic cultural expression, closely tied to the community's spiritual life.

The historical trajectory of Manipuri dance, from its origins in the sacred rituals of *Lai Haraoba* to the more formalized classical *Raas Leela*, reflects a continuous process of adaptation and transformation. The infusion of martial arts, like Thang-Ta, into dance performances, and the integration of local folklore and religious symbolism into dance forms, highlights the deep connection between dance and the social fabric of Manipur. Moreover, festivals like *Lai Haraoba*, *Ratha Yatra*, and *Heikru Hidongba* not only provide an occasion for celebration but also serve as essential platforms for the preservation and transmission of these traditional dance forms.

The folk and ritual dances, such as *Maibi Jagoi*, *Panthoibi Jagoi*, and *Khamba-Thoibi Jagoi*, represent the spiritual and emotional resonance of the Manipuri people. They embody the community's relationship with the divine, nature, and its historical narratives, making them indispensable to the cultural landscape. These dances are not merely artistic performances but living traditions that narrate the stories of the people, preserving their values, beliefs, and historical experiences.

Through the study of Manipuri dance, it becomes evident that these dance forms are not just performative arts but are integral to the identity of the region. They reflect the socio-cultural, religious, and historical fabric of Manipur, offering invaluable insights into the traditions and worldview of its people. As these dance forms continue to evolve and adapt, they remain a crucial part of Manipur's heritage, ensuring the continuity of its cultural traditions for future generations.

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