Contribution of Tripura in adoption of Manipuri Dance style at Shantiniketan

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The author has narrated the contributions of Tripura to the introduction of Manipuri dance style in Santiniketan culture. Its grace and beauty touched the heart of Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore so much that he requested the then Maharajah of Tripura to send a Manipuri dance teacher to Santiniketan. The Maharajah readily responded, and since then Manipuri dance has flourished at this prestigious institution.

Tripura has played a prominent role in introducing Manipuri dance form in the tradition of dances adopted in Shantiniketan. This role emerged through the close association of Rabindranath Tagore with the Royal family of Tripura. The relationship between Rabindranath and Tripura is a cherished chapter of Tripura's history now. Rabindra literature equally bears the clear impact of Tripura. It was the king of Tripura, Maharaja Birchandra Manikya who warmly felicitated the poet while he was still young. The great poet visited Tripura seven times during his entire life. It was during these visits to the state that he was drawn towards Manipuri dance form. The Maharajkumar of Tripura later sent Manipuri dance teacher from his court to Shantiniketan as desired by the poet. The part played in "Nateer Puja", "Shaapmochan", "Chitrangada", "Nritya natya", incorporating the art of dancing by Tripura's Manipuri dance teacher, was highly appreciated by all.

Research has been undertaken to find out as to why Rabindranath felt inspired about dance, and why he adopted dance-training in Shantiniketan. According to Pratima Devi, Rabindranath visited Tripura occasionally and it was during these visits that he could first realise the prospect and potentiality of the art of dancing. Shantidev Ghosh writes that “Gurudev did not merely want to train dancers. His aim was to impart all-round education, knowledge and other faculties of art to mould the society into a creative and peaceful entity. His idea was to adopt the art of dancing as a means towards such an end. During the reign of Radhakishore Manikya in B.S. 1306 (Bikrama Samvut) Rabindranath first paid a visit to Tripura. On this occasion a performance of Manipuri dance was arranged as a part of grand reception accorded to him. Later he also witnessed Manipuri dance in Sylhet as well as at Tripura on various occasions. At one stage, he requested Maharajkumar Brajendra Kishore to find out an experienced dance artist. On consultation with Maharaja Birendra Kishore, the Manipuri Rajkumar Buddhimantra Singha was sent to Shantiniketan. Tagore’s biographer, Prabhat Mukherjee stated, “On the establishment of Vishwabharati an attempt was made to introduce Manipuri dance form in the curricula of Shantiniketan. An artist named Buddhimantra Singha was available from Tripura......... The boys started to be trained in dance lessons with notations of percussion produced in ‘Khol’ of Buddhimantra.”

Buddhimantra stayed at Shantiniketan for a brief period and his contribution to impart dance lessons was remarkable. Initially the dance lessons started with the boys only, but the poet took initiative to induct the girls also in that discipline. The poet wanted to bring wife of Buddhimantra to Shantiniketan for this purpose. It was in the year 1326 B.S., 19th Magha, that the poet wrote to Tripura Maharaja, Birendra Kishore- “Our girls are also eager to learn dancing and Manipuri arts and crafts. If the Maharaja could kindly issue instructions to send the wife of Buddhimantra, our expectations will be fulfilled.”

After a few years of the return of Buddhimantra, Rabindranath again wanted a Manipuri dance teacher from Tripura. In response to this demand the Maharajkumar Brajendra Kishore sent the
family dance teacher of his own house, Nabakumar, to Shantiniketan. Shri Nabakumar played a pioneering role to give shape to dance component of “Nateer Puja”. Rabindranath first presented a unique form of dance in “Nateer Puja” in such a manner that it carried the essence of the whole play. Later on by dint of the experience acquired so far, he further produced plays like ‘Tasher Desh’, ‘Shaapmochan’ in which the medium of dance was used in a manner that was highly expressive.

About “Nateer Puja”, Tagore’s biographer states, “This new dance consciousness at Shantiniketan was unfolded by the dexterous Manipuri dance artiste Nabakumar Thakur”. Nabakumar became very famous in demonstrating Manipuri dance. In 1341 B.S. Rabindranath with his troupe visited Ceylon. There he presented “Shaapmochan”. Nabakumar was in that group and formulated the dance component in an exalted manner. Tagore’s biographer further states, - “It was a remarkable event that Nabakumar came to Shantiniketan. Because from the person of Nabakumar the dance style of Shantiniketan acquired a new dimension. A true dance teacher emerged after a long time.” About Nabakumar, Shantidev Ghosh also said, “I have never found the capacity to give songs of Gurudev a dramatic form in dance in any other dancer than Nabakumar. At that period the dance drama style in Shantiniketan gained excellence profusely in Manipuri form.” Due to his success in Shantiniketan Nabakumar received invitations from Ahmedabad, Bombay and some other places. About experience in Shantiniketan blessed by the proximity of Tagore, Nabakumar, in his last days, wrote, “From time to time the poet related his experiences on witnessing dances in various places. From South Indian style of dance, folk dances of Sylhet, again dancing style of Nabadwip, — nothing was left. I would be quite ignorant of presenting successful dance form keeping with the language, tune and sense of the song if I would not have been blessed with his constant association. My first hand idea, I received from the Kaviguru”.

In 1935 another famous Manipuri dance artiste, Rajkumar Chandrajit Singh, went to Shantiniketan. In giving shape to dance style in dance-drama, “Chitrangada” he played an important role. He instilled his creativity with original Manipuri form. Chandrajit Singh acquired great eminence in Shantiniketan. He stayed there for three years. His students at that time were Yomuna Basu, daughter of Nandalal, Mrinalini Sarabhai, daughter-in-law of Ambalal Sarabhai, and Rabindranath’s adopted daughter, Nandita Kripalani. On return to Agartala Chandrajit worked as a teacher in Maharani Tulsivati School and the Music College there. After 44 years after the year 1892 Chitrangada dance-drama received a new profile during a performance from 11th to 13 March, 1936. “Chitrangada” was first presented in the Empire Theatre in Calcutta. With that dance-drama, there is still another name associated, that of Shri Neelenswar Mukhopadhyay.

While visiting Sylhet in 1919 the poet witnessed Rakhal Naach (dance) in a Harimandir. Neelenswar Babu was in the main role of the Naach. The poet was highly impressed by witnessing the dance. The poet rewarded the artist with Rs. 5. After one and a half decades in 1935 Neelenswar babu got a chance to work in Shantiniketan through Shri Anil Chanda of Silchar who had been the personal Secretary of Kaviguru. The poet was then contemplating to stage “Chitrangada”. There was demand for Manipuri dance artiste and musicians again.

With the successful staging of the dance drama in Calcutta it was then successively staged in Patna, Allahabad, Meerut, Delhi, Lahore, and other big cities. Tagore’s biographer wrote, - “The objectives behind this were the propagation of the dance culture of Shantiniketan as well as the collection of fund for its empty coffer. At the age of 75 the poet himself went round the North India with his entourage.

In the play Chitrangada, Neelenswar Babu played the role of Arjun associate and the villager. He was privileged to have affectionate association of Kaviguru for several years in Shantiniketan. He was a teacher of Manipuri dance and made valuable contribution in propagating Manipuri dance style.

In March 1983 Neelenswar Babu was included in the group of artistes that was constituted for staging “Chitrangada” in East Bengal led by Shantidev Ghosh. After working for some years in Shantiniketan he returned to his home town Sylhet with indifferent health. After the partition of India he came to Kailashahar, Tripura, with his family. He chose to reside in the village Mashauli permanently.
In the twilight years of his life, Neeleswar Babu in the serene backdrop of the village Mashauli continued his practice in dance and music. He taught his disciples with devotion and care. The author of this article had been to Mashauli two and a half decades back to pay respect to Neeleswar Babu. He was then in bed with old age ailments. On being asked about Kaviguru, the once Arjun associate’s eyes grew moist. The author asked about the experience of his first meeting with the Kaviguru. He replied, “I said my pronam by touching his feet at which Gurudev said,” Teach them attentively, don’t play hide and seek.”

In 1935-36 another dance teacher, Shri Vasanta Singha, went to Shantiniketan in the preparatory stage of “Chitrangada”. Shri Vasanta Singha was the dance teacher in the royal palace. During the reign of Maharaja Bir Bikram, Shri Vasanta Singha successfully performed as the director of dance recital in the function arranged in the capital palace.

The assimilation of Manipuri dance in the dances in Shantiniketan has enriched our cultural entity. This role of Tripura is a memorable contribution. From the hilly Tripura, several dance teachers had gone to Shantiniketan on different occasions. They have assimilated the Manipuri dance style in the dance-tradition of Shantiniketan. These were highly praised in the country and abroad. Why Gurudev turned his attention to dance and why dance training was started in Shantiniketan, can be a matter of further research. It is a matter of pride, however, that right from the beginning of the dance forms of Shantiniketan the glorious role of Tripura will be remembered again and again.

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