



Manipuri Dance Practice in Bengal: Historical Development, Cultural Integration, and Contemporary Relevance

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Article Info

ISSN (online): 2582-7138

Volume: 06

Issue: 04

July - August 2025

Received: 07-05-2025

Accepted: 07-06-2025

Published: 02-07-2025

Page No: 540-541

Abstract

This research paper explores the journey of Manipuri dance in Bengal, tracing its historical roots, institutional backing, and evolving contemporary relevance. Introduced by Rabindranath Tagore in the early 20th century, Manipuri dance found fertile ground in Bengal's open and spiritually inclined cultural atmosphere. The article discusses key contributors, institutional efforts, socio-cultural impacts, and future directions that highlight the vitality and enduring appeal of this classical dance tradition within West Bengal.

Keywords: Contributors, Institutional Efforts, Socio-Cultural Impacts

1. Introduction

Dance has always held a prominent place in Bengali culture, not merely as entertainment but as a form of religious and aesthetic expression. From the ritualistic performances described in Mangal Kavyas to the devotional dance of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, Bengal's relationship with dance has been deeply spiritual and artistic. The arrival of Manipuri dance in this culturally rich landscape marked the beginning of a unique inter-regional exchange that has continued to evolve and inspire.

2. Cultural and Historical Foundations

Ancient and medieval Bengali literature provides evidence of dance being a significant cultural activity. In texts like Manasa Mangal and Chandi Mangal, characters such as Behula are described with elegance in their dance postures, revealing the integration of narrative and movement.

The Vaishnavite movement led by Chaitanya Mahaprabhu in the 15th century catalyzed the spiritual use of dance. Chaitanya himself is known to have performed dramatic and symbolic dances, merging Bhakti and Natya traditions. Such practices set a cultural precedent that later enabled Bengal to accept Manipuri dance, also rooted in Vaishnavism, with remarkable openness.

3. Introduction of Manipuri Dance to Bengal

Manipuri dance was formally introduced to Bengal in 1920 when Rabindranath Tagore invited Guru Buddhimanta Singh to Santiniketan. Tagore saw in the dance form an aesthetic ideal that matched the lyrical and spiritual tone of his own compositions. This early initiative made Santiniketan the cradle of Manipuri dance outside Manipur.

Shortly after, in 1921, a troupe from Manipur performed the Raas Leela in Kolkata during the visit of the Prince of Wales. Directed by Guru Maisnam Amubi Singh, this performance took place near the Victoria Memorial and became the first public display of Manipuri dance in Bengal. This marked a significant cultural milestone and was instrumental in sparking widespread interest among Bengalis.

4. Institutionalization and Pedagogical Expansion

The growth of Manipuri dance in Bengal owes much to institutional support, especially from Visva-Bharati in Santiniketan and

Rabindra Bharati University in Kolkata.

At Santiniketan, after the foundational work of Gurus Buddhimanta Singh and Nabakumar Singh, the tradition was further advanced by eminent teachers like Guru Kabrabam Jatindra Singh (known as "Jiten Da"), Guru Konjengbam Sunita Devi, and Guru Yaikhom Hemanta Kumar. These gurus formalized syllabi for undergraduate, postgraduate, and M.Phil courses, incorporating traditional elements such as Chali Pareng, Bhangi Pareng, Jagoi Raas, and the dance rituals of Lai Haraoba.

Visva-Bharati became a central university in 1951, expanding its faculty to include a range of experts in Manipuri dance. Accompanists such as R.K. Binodini Devi (vocal) and Chongtham Bocha Singh (Pung) were vital in maintaining the authenticity of the performances and training.

Meanwhile, in Kolkata, two major institutions shaped the Manipuri dance landscape: Meitei Jagoi, founded by Guru Devjani Chaliha, and Manipuri Nartanalaya, established by Guru Bipin Singh and Guru Kalavati Devi. These institutions attracted non-Manipuri students and inspired Bengali dancers to embrace and master the form. Their contributions helped position Kolkata as a leading center for Manipuri dance outside Manipur.

5. Role of Visionaries and Pioneering Artists

Rabindranath Tagore's role was instrumental in elevating dance within Bengali society. At a time when dancing was considered inappropriate for women from respectable families, he encouraged performances by artists like Gouri Basu, daughter of artist Nandalal Bose. Her performance in 1926 on Tagore's birthday marked a cultural breakthrough and inspired generations of Bengali women to pursue dance. Another visionary, Uday Shankar, met Guru Amubi Singh in 1937 during a performance in Kolkata. The collaboration led to the creation of iconic solo compositions like Nila Kamala Dala Shyam, performed by Amala Shankar, and marked a turning point for Manipuri solo dance on the national stage. Later performers such as Dr. Sruti Bandopadhyay, who received the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award in 2020, and Priti Patel have upheld the highest standards in performance and pedagogy. Despite being biologically non-Manipuri, they have played key roles in spreading Manipuri dance across India and abroad, thus demonstrating the inclusive and universal appeal of the tradition.

6. Socio-Cultural Impact and Gender Dynamics

Manipuri dance in Bengal has played a subtle yet powerful role in challenging social norms, especially related to gender. It provided a respectable artistic platform for women in the early 20th century, contributing to the wider movement of women's emancipation in cultural life. The association of the dance with devotional themes and Rabindra Sangeet further legitimized its practice in conservative circles. The art form also enabled cultural exchange between the Northeast and Bengal, helping bridge regional gaps and creating a shared artistic vocabulary. This spirit of collaboration continues today through festivals, academic conferences, and joint research initiatives.

7. Contemporary Practice and Challenges

Today, institutions like Sruti Performing Troupe, Anjika, Nartanashram, Purbachal Navanandanik Movement Arts, Salt Lake Nartanalaya, and others serve as major hubs for the

practice and teaching of Manipuri dance in Bengal. Notable contemporary performers include Dr. Mallika Saha, Somabha Bandopadhyay, Tamalika Dey, Rintu Das, and many more young artists committed to carrying the tradition forward.

However, the tradition faces new challenges: dwindling attention spans, commercial pressures, and the need to appeal to contemporary audiences without diluting classical integrity. The COVID-19 pandemic also disrupted training and performance schedules, compelling a shift to digital platforms, which has both limitations and opportunities. Yet, innovations are underway. Teachers are incorporating multimedia tools for training, while choreographers experiment with fusion formats. New research areas such as dance therapy, ethnographic documentation, and semiotic studies are opening fresh avenues for academic and practical engagement with Manipuri dance.

8. Conclusion

The journey of Manipuri dance in Bengal, from its introduction by Rabindranath Tagore to its current academic and artistic vitality, represents a remarkable cultural saga. It is a story of visionaries, educators, performers, and institutions working collectively to nurture an art form far from its geographical origin.

In a time when India is emphasizing cultural diplomacy and regional inclusivity, the case of Manipuri dance in Bengal serves as a compelling example of how traditions can travel, adapt, and thrive. As long as this spirit of collaboration, reverence for tradition, and openness to innovation endures, Manipuri dance will continue to flourish in Bengal and beyond.

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