



Manipuri Ras Leela in Tripura: A Diasporic Perspective

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Abstract:

Within the socio-cultural context of Diaspora, dance stood as an embodiment of cultural expressions that permeate the nexus of past, present and future. To contextualize it as a manifestation of collectiveness of past migration, memories, present resettlement and future formation of identities, with regards to 'homeland' and 'host-land', the term 'cultural dance' is preferred to be used in the present article. The framework for the study is transnationalism, which proved to be fruitful paradigm to apply concerning Manipur, now a north-eastern state of India, as once a sovereign kingdom that had its fair share of cross-border migration with its neighboring kingdoms of Tripura, Assam, Myanmar, Bangladesh etc. Dance, had always been a medium of expression, and in Diaspora, cultural dance can be discerned as a way of connecting with the homeland and the memory that comes with the movement of human bodies both in migration and dance. With special reference to one of the performing arts of Manipur, Manipuri Ras Leela in Tripura, the paper will be a humble attempt to understand not only the nature of this particular cultural dance but also the spatial-cultural practice that locates the 'home' through embodied action (i.e. dance) and its representations which are interpreted by the performers and audiences. And to study that, a transnational perspective will be observed to understand the nature and development of Manipuri diasporic settlement in Tripura, once an independent kingdom, before being merged to the Union of India in 1949. By 21st century, a sizeable corpus of diaspora and migration studies have emerged, yet research in Manipuri diaspora is almost absent in the academia. It is rather surprising, if not necessary, that diaspora from Manipur or Northeastern erstwhile kingdoms of India is yet to find an adequate critical research and attention when there is a long history of cross-border migration in Manipur and its neighboring kingdoms. Almost all research in Manipur exclusively focus on its rich history, literature, performing arts, sports and culture which overshadows the importance of other areas such as the history of Manipuri diaspora community and its socio-cultural backdrop that acts a branch of larger Manipuri

consciousness, recollected in their socio-cultural practices such as festivals, dance forms, food habits etc. To understand the lived experience of the diaspora community, the present paper aims to uncover the nuances of representation in Manipuri Ras Leela in Tripura as a cultural dance in diaspora. The dearth of research, the research gap in this area, is one of the factors of proposing and working on the entitled topic.

Keywords: Cultural dance, Diaspora studies, Identity, Representation, Religious dance

Introduction

Diaspora is a term used to denote a community displaced from homeland either voluntarily (in search of better livelihood) or forcefully (due to conflicts or wars). It comes from the Greek word '*diaspeirein*', which means 'to scatter', associated with the Biblical displacement of Jews from their homeland. In present, it is used to refer to dispersal of population from their original geographical location, often entailing the keywords migration, border-crossing, displacement, trans-nationalism etc.

Features of diasporic community involve dislocation; moving away from one's homeland with a collective sense of loss and nostalgia, often forced to occupy a space of in-betweenness in "heterogeneous cultures, spatially separated from their place of origin yet living between places of their identity and cultural life". They are in constant obsession with search of identity, "a dialectic between past and present, a 'double consciousness' of the sense of looking at one's self through the eyes of others" (W.E.B. Dubois, 1989, p179). Here, the diasporic community is contested on the loyalties between homeland and host-land, harboring a conflict between 'what is there' and 'what is here'. In order to identify themselves lead to the formulation of collective consciousness, of 'imagined communities' reflected in their socio-religious and cultural practices aligned with that of their distant homeland. Just like any diasporic community, Manipuri diasporic community also exhibits such characteristics; in longing a connection with their origin land- Manipur.

Manipur and Tripura are now Indian states, both annexed into the Union of India in 1949, Manipur merged under the reign of Maharaja Bodhachandra Singh and Tripura under the reign Kirit Bikram Kishore Manikya, the merger agreement signed by his mother Maharani Kanchan Prava on behalf of her minor son. However, the perspective of trans-nationalism will be applied in studying Meiteis (a dominant community of Manipur) in Tripura as diasporic community. Because, the displaced populace started to settle in their respective host-lands, Meiteis in Myanmar, Bangladesh, Tripura, Assam etc. while they were once sovereign kingdoms. The migration process, just like any nation state involves influx and outflow with the neighboring with neighboring regions. And, it is to be noted that Manipur is known as the melting pot, confluence of east and west that even in ancient trade route between Central Asia and Southeast Asia, Manipur also had its presence, "the ancient Chinese Silk route also passed through Imphal and Manipur till today has the imprint of Greek route going towards Greek civilization. Ptolemy, the famous Greek astronomer, mathematician and geographer knew about Manipur and recorded it as "Mareura" in the 2nd Century A.D." (Bhubol 2021, p126). Thus, it is inevitable that migration happened since earlier times. There are Manipuri diasporic community settled in present day neighboring countries of Myanmar and Bangladesh which had historic accounts on their early and present settlement, also in other countries due to globalization. Also, a significant amount of them

settled in now Indian states of Tripura, Assam, Meghalaya, Bengal etc, with seemingly historical settlement and present migration in search for better livelihood.

For the present paper, the objective is to study Manipuris (Meiteis in Tripura) as subjects of trans-border migration with Manipur and Tripura as once independent Hindu kingdoms, before being integrated into the Union of India to be termed as Diaspora. Unlike Meiteis in Myanmar and Bangladesh and other parts of world, Meiteis settled in India bear certain reasoning. Nevertheless, since its inception of the term Diaspora, right from the Jews, Armenian (considered as ‘classical diaspora’), Africans (victim diaspora), Irish etc., the theoretical concept of the term has expanded multiple possibilities. Therefore, the study of Meiteis in Tripura as Diasporic community can be an entry point into the exploration of a diasporic perspective in the context of Manipuri Diaspora. In doing so, the beliefs and practices of Meitei diaspora community in Tripura will be studied, to situate their collective cultural identity as cultural dance in diaspora. And, to formulate a critical understanding of highlighting dance, particularly Manipuri Ras Reela observed in Tripura, as manifestation of cultural embodiments, the paper attempts to locate how cultural dance can be explored as a way of connecting with the homelands, and the collective memory that aligns with the migration and dance with movement of human bodies.

Meitei Diaspora in Tripura

The present day Manipur and Tripura were known with different names to neighboring kingdoms throughout history, Tripura as *Takhel* to the Manipuris and Manipur as *Mekhali* to the Tripuris. The first settlement of Manipuris in Tripura was in Mekhalipara, now situated in west Tripura, still stands today sadly with no Meitei population. As in every human civilization, migration happened incessantly, Meiteis migration in Tripura can be studied in two main stages; firstly migration through political and matrimonial alliances, secondly displacement due to conflicts (in the case of Manipur is Seven Years Devastation, 1819-1826) that led to mass exodus of Manipuris to neighboring regions. Although, the main focus of the paper is on Meiteis in Tripura, it is to be noted that Tripuris too migrated to Manipur as early as during the reign of King Pakhangba () of Manipur. Dr. Khomdon writes in *Encyclopedia of Manipur (Vol-2)* about the ancestors of Kakching people of Manipur, Khaplangba believed to be contemporary of King Pakhangba who went to Tripura in search of iron. He was offered the hand of Tripuri princess Kalika and they returned to Manipur and later settled at Kakching. Both Khaplangba and Kalika are revered as god and goddess of Kaching people (p685). The migration followed from time to time that “Govinda Manikya of Tripura with his relatives and followers came to Manipur in the reign of Meidingu Ningthoukhomba (1432-1467) and had settled there since then” (Manipur Past and Present, p23). Tripuri princesses were also given in hand to Manipuri kings as matrimonial/political alliance, for example Umila Devi, daughter of Raja Krishnakishore of Tripura was married to R.K. Tilak Singh, Manipuri prince who also happened to be grandson of great king of Manipur, King Bhagyachandra.

Matrimonial alliances between the royal families were frequent as recorded in the royal chronicles “Cheitharol Kumbaba” (Manipur) and “Rajmala” (Tripura). The first reference made in ‘Rajmala’ of the alliance was during the reign of 43rd king of Tripura, King Taidakshin who married a Mekhali princess. There are many records in Manipur, as in Cheitharol Kumbaba of Akoicham Yangnu in 1609 A.D., married to Tripuri king, even during the reign of Manipuri King Khagemba (1597-1652) and Raja Yasodhar Manikya

(1600-1623) of Tripura. However, mention of an alliance recorded in both royal chronicles and aligned with both kingdoms is when Tripura King Rajdhar Manikya II (1785-1804 AD) in 1798 married Manipuri princess Hariseswari, daughter of Meitei King Bhagyachandra. Besides numerous royal marriages happened later on, the Rajas of Tripura also married Manipuri girls of simple families who had immigrated to Tripura. The marriage alliances not only brought cordial relations between the two kingdoms but also there was cultural assimilation. The tradition of marrying Manipuri girls were even followed by many noblemen of the Tripura royal family. Tripura also witnessed various public welfare works that was contributed by the Manipuri Maharanis. The descendants preserved their culture, art, dance and music and even speak Manipuri language in Tripura palace. Queen Harisheswari Devi brought an idol of Shri ShriRadhamadav from Manipur and installed it at Radhanagar of present capital Agartala and Ras leela, a religious festival of Manipur was performed. Since, Ras Leela is being celebrated every year in Rajpurnima at shri shri Radhamandav temple. Now it has turned into a festival for everyone – people from all religions flocked to witness the dance ritual. In fact, Manipuri dance gain its classical status when Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore after witnessing it at Sylhet, Bangladesh and for the second time, it was presented in his honor at Malncha Niwas, Agartala. Impressed with the art form, Tagore introduced Manipuri dance in Santiniketan requesting the king to send a dance teacher to teach Manipuri dance. Rajkumar Buddhimanta Singh was sent accordingly to teach Manipuri in Santiniketan and the history began. Manipuri culture indeed helped in bringing out a unique characteristic of Tripura kingdom. Many Maharanis also constructed temples such as Maharani Rajeshwari constructed Pakhangba temple (Pagla Devta), Agartala, Maharani Tulsibati constructed Puthiba temple at Abhoynagar, Agartala etc. Maharani Tulsibati was expert in composition of songs and poems. The Manipuri queens enriched the royal palace with their religion and culture besides receiving royal patronage to preserve and separate their culture and religion. Thus, Meiteis began to settle in Tripura through matrimonial alliances and also as displaced immigrants due to conflicts in their origin state. However, they have deeply associated themselves with the evolvement of Tripuri culture and history so much so that they are now integral part of Tripura.

Cultural Dance in Diaspora: A Study of Manipuri Ras Leela in Tripura

Cultural dance are dances associated with the context of a specific culture. In the case of Diaspora, cultural dance can be regarded synonymous to “long-distance nationalism”, where diasporic community engages with the homeland in maintaining a socio-cultural and religious tie. This element can be seen while observing the celebration of Manipuri Ras Leela in Tripura.

Manipuri Ras leela serves as the identity marker in their hyphenated lives, shaped between homeland and host-land, of opposing cultures.

Manipur became a full-fledged official Hindu kingdom by 18th century during the reign of King Bhagyachandra who had equal regard for both incoming Gaudya Vaishnavism and indigenous Meitei religion. Thereby, Manipur Vaishnavism evolves that has elements of Meitei traditional religious practices, assimilated with the new found faith of Viashnava tradition. During his reign and the periods of descendant Hindu kings, various performing arts emerge such Nata Sankirtana, Ras Leela, Gostha Leela, Goura leela etc. When Meiteis

migrated to other regions, they brought with them the socio-religious and cultural practices that they had been accustomed to. The beginning of celebration of Manipuri Ras Leela is when princess turned Queen Harisheswori brought the idol and installed it at Radhamadav when she got married and settled at Tripura. She, just like her father was religious and the king accepted his religious aspiration. In fact, the first Manipuri Ras Leela in Tripura was performed during this period and it has been continuing to be celebrated every year mirroring the traditions followed at Manipur. With his patronage, the famous Sri Radhamadhav temple was consecrated along with high priests, musicians and helpers, the king even requested Manipuri noblemen to settle nearby, the place came to be known as 'Mekhlipara'. The capital got shifted from old to new Agartala during the period of Krishna Kishore Manikya (1829-1849) and Sri Radhamadhav got shifted too, now named after it at Radhanagar. Various Hindu religious festivals are celebrated here in the imitation of Manipur's equally significant Sri Sri Govindaji temple. There are five kinds of Ras leela in Manipur; Maha Ras, Kunja Ras, Basanta Ras, Nitya Ras, and Diva Ras. The first three Ras Leelas were introduced by Maharaj Bhagyachandra and the following Nitya Ras by Maharaj Chandrakirti (1850-1886) and Maharaj Churachand (1891-1941). When Manipuris started to settle in Tripura in significant numbers and had influence in the royal court, only the first three Ras were introduced. Thus, out of all five Ras Leelas, Maha Ras was mostly performed and still continue to be performed in present. Apart from it, other Ras Leela forms are also performed occasionally. Maha Ras is celebrated on the full moon day, in the month of Kartik at Radhamandhav temple. It is to be noted that the first Ras Leela in Manipur was observed in 1779 A.D., and the first Ras performed outside of Manipur was in Tripura, 19 years later in 1798 and it has been continuing for more than 200 years.

Dr. Astamika Sinha and Debasish Datta writes in *The matrimonial relationship of the manikyas of Tripura with Manipur* about the contributions of Manipuri Queens that "They were also instrumental in enriching the culture of Tripura by introducing classical Manipuri dance and the famous Rash Leela. The Manipuri consorts also elevated the Vaishavite tradition in Tripura" (p66). Not only Ras Leela, the royal citadel and the whole Tripuri Kingdom were influenced by the religious practices and began the patronage various other art forms and culture as well. They even offered land to Manipuri Brahmins, Manipuri retinues and people as act of recognition, "In the year 1804 Ramganga Manikya along with his brother Kashichandra Manikya while staying in Bishgaon village under the jurisdiction of the King of Tripura came to know about Manipuri culture...that they have given the land in the name of God called Madanchakra, worshipped by the Brahmins of that village" (Sudeshna Singha, p5).

In maintaining a tie with their homeland, as reflected in Manipuri Ras Leela performance in Tripura, it is observed on the same day of the year, following the Hindu calendar and tradition of Manipuri Sri Sri Govindaji temple. Since its inception, Manipuri royal and noblewomen take part in the performance and the same way Manipuri queens of Tripura also followed this custom. Queen Hariseswori, and even Queen Ratnamanjuri (Queen of Radha Kishore Manikya, daughter of King Devendra of Manipur, exiled in Dhaka, Bangladesh) participated as 'makok chingbi' lead dancer in the performance. The Kings also accepted and popularize the Manipuri culture as most of them had Manipuri queens and consorts and it flourished more prominently during the reigns from Maharaja Bir Chandra Manikya (1862-96) to Birendra Kishore Manikya (1909 – 1923). Maharaja Bir Chandra Manikya was known for his love for literature, art,

music and culture, he himself was a poet, lyricist and many more. And he was even said to participate personally in organizing Manipuri Ras leela and even tried to add new adjustments to the dance costumes. Separate to the tradition, brought from Manipur, he led to the formation of another dance form called 'Jhulan Ras' in Tripura. Just as Stuart Hall writes in *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*, "diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference" (Hall 1990, 235), we can see the occurrences of possible cultural hybridity, of multi-cultural existence with regards to variations of socio-cultural practices. Maharaj Bir Chandra Manikya composed many songs which were staged and performed in Manipuri dance dramas and Shri Shri Julan lyrics in Jhulan Ras; he is known to be its chief propagator. There are also other official royal groups such as 'Ningthem Pala', who are in charge of Sankirtana just like in Manipur. It was formed during the reign of Radha Kishore Manikya (1896 – 1909). Rabindranath Tagore visited Tripura during his period and the rest is history which led to nationalization of Manipuri dance as one of the classical dances of India. Later on, Birendra Kishore Manikya adapted Mahadhumel kirtan and performed at Radhamandav temple along with the Manipuri gurus and performers creating a heavenly and artistic atmosphere. The practice of Manipuri dance and culture thus continue becoming an essential custom for the royalty that in 1928, in the coronation ceremony of Tripuri king Maharaja Bir Bikram, Manipuri Kirtan was performed. The king died on 1947, and Tripura was annexed into the Union of India in 1949 just like Manipur. In pre-merger period and now as one of Indian states of India, Meiteis in Tripura have been safeguarding their identity and their cultural practices, more so evident in the celebration of Manipuri Ras Leela in Tripura marked as an 'imagined community', flourishing in their new homeland.

Conclusion

Meitei diasporic community that has historical accounts and significance be it in Myanmar, Bangladesh, Assam, Tripura etc. are now recognized and assimilated as the rightful denizens of the land. They regard themselves as loyal subjects of their imagined home. They have successfully carved their identity and make their presence felt as Foucault rightly states "subjects are constituted, but they are not passive. In subjects being historically formed they are changeable and thereby serve as a permanent provocation to the concept of Knowledge/power" (Foucault 2000, p342). The Manipuri queens in Tripuri palace and their legacy remain in the chapters of Tripuri Kingdom heralding a cultural renaissance and the descendants lived to continue the 'past-present' apparatus of becoming and of being.

Manipuri Ras in Tripura is a living witness to this legacy, a space of refiguring the nostalgia of home, necessity of home, a home re-imagined, far from 'home'.

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