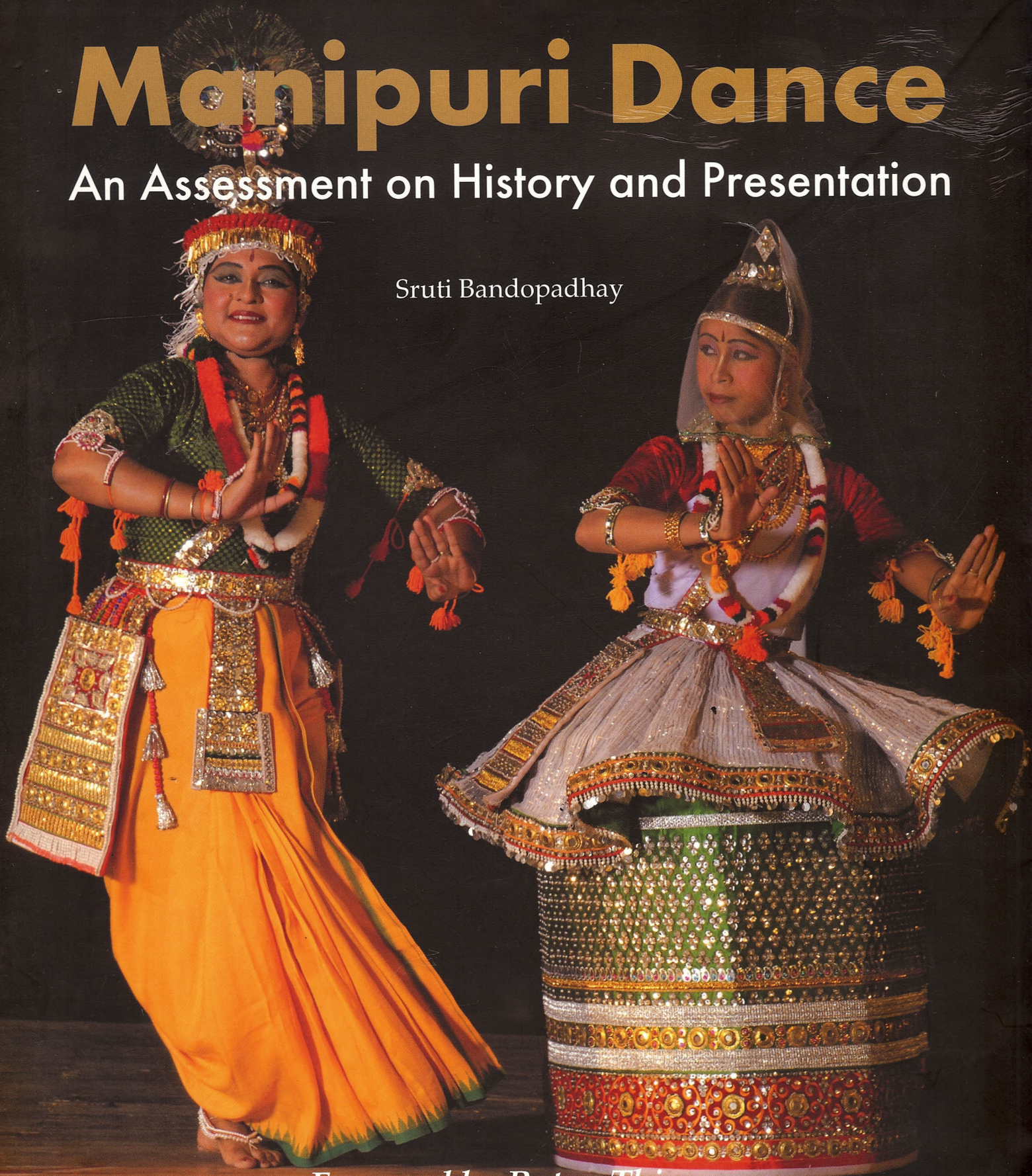


Manipuri Dance

An Assessment on History and Presentation

Sruti Bandopadhyay



Foreword by Ratan Thiyam

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An Assessment on History and Presentation





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An Assessment on History and Presentation



Sruti Bandopadhyay

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Sruti Performing Troupe

Cover photo

Dr. Sruti Bandopadhyay as Krsna

& Vidya Rani Devi as Radha



Dedicated

To

The respected **GURUs**, whose creative contributions have enriched the tradition of **MANIPURI ART OF DANCING**, which have quenched the thirst of art loving people amongst whom I am one, fortunate to have received a drop of this nectar.



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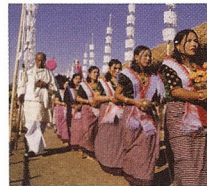
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Introduction

The love for dance is rooted in me from the moment of my birth. My parents remembered that I would move to any rhythmical tune and the joy palpable in my eyes indicated my feelings of affection, adoration and devotion to the eternal movement art. In India the school academics did not incorporate performing art subjects the then time. So admission to a very high standard English medium school in Kolkata, South Point High School, did not really help me to pursue my interest field as a part of my routine study. I was admitted to Children's Little Theatre (CLT), a renowned children's academy of performing art in Kolkata. Stalwarts of dance and theatre field were associated with this institution and being nurtured under such personalities was my first solid grounding for presentation on stage. It was here that I came across the words Folk, Classical, Rabindranṛtya etc. The dances I learnt I enjoyed and the names and kinds of dances made no impact at that age. My dance classes included Kathakali taught by Balakrishna Menon, Odissi taught by Muralidhar Majhi, Manipuri by Kalavati Devi and other regional and folk dances. The other classical dances like Kathak and Bharatanātyam was also on the repertoire and an exposure to these helped me to learn the distinctive features of different dances of India. The children's dance dramas were a great place to learn theatre acting and frequent stage appearances in variety roles trained me up with proscenium concept and presentation.

As I grew up playing with almost all the dance forms, I started developing a fond inclination towards Manipuri. The padavali songs accompanying this dance, the sweetness of the syllables used the intricacies of the rhythmic patterns and above all the subtle nuances of this dance form, where the whole body comes into play with a poise of gestures suited perfectly with my mental settings. I started learning Manipuri seriously under Kalavati Devi, who groomed my body for Manipuri dance from that early age. I passed out of school and thus out of CLT. My innate wish to take up dance as a subject in undergraduate level could not stand up to my parents' expectations. So I took admission in Science subjects for college academics with Physics as my honors subject. But my training in Manipuri pursued now under Guru Bipin Singh in Manipuri Nartanalaya, Kolkata. I came across the tutelage of the Jhaveri Sisters particularly Darshana Jhaveri whose affectionate teaching of this form has immensely enhanced my understanding of this dance form.

Guru Bipin Singh inspired and encouraged me to explore myself of the possibility to become a front ranking performer of this dance form. It was quite a challenge because at no point did I ever dream of becoming a professional dance artist. Moreover with a family background that would prefer a run of the mill career option, the idea to diverge myself into performing art occupation did leave me baffled for some time. But the untiring practice that I was put into at 15A Bipin Pal Road i.e. Guruji's residence and the office of Manipuri Nartanalaya, made me not realize how the time passed by and within a few years I found myself performing in almost all the leading festivals in India and abroad. Guru Bipin Singh's efforts to establish Manipuri Dance as a solo repertoire for the stage gained quite a mileage and I was very fortunate to be one of his primary disciples in this direction of experimentation and innovation. At a

point of my career I teamed up with Priti Patel and performed Guru Bipin Singh's compositions as duet presentations.

Guru Bipin Singh laid the foundation of Manipuri dance in my body. His analysis on the compositions of classical dances still roves in my mind. Understanding the Manipuri dance art took me to Manipur, where several masters like Ojhā Bābu Singh, Ojhā Gourakisor Sharma, Ojhā Surachand Sharma, Ojhā Nilakantha Singh, Prof. Manihar Singh, Prof. N. Tombi Singh, Ojhā Thanil Singh spoke about this dance. Not that I understood all that was said, but the quest for in-depth study hammered me every now and then.

Academics were always a prime direction for me and hence after my graduation I decided to move with dance as a composite whole. Encouraged by the then Head of the Department of Dance, Prof (Dr) Sunil Kothari, I took admission in Masters in Dance at the Rabindra Bharati University with Manipuri as the special paper. This helped me to delve into the more theoretical aspects of Indian dances including its history, appreciation and formation. This course was an eye opener to the immense possibility of study in dance. With the advice of Dr. Kapila Vatsyayan, I appeared for the National Education Test that is conducted by the University Grants Commission. I passed the exam for both Junior Research Fellowship (JRF) and Lectureship. I remember Prof. Pabitra Sarkar, the then Vice Chancellor of the University, advised me to accept the JRF instead of a Lectureship and move about freely for research and performance. This enabled me for a moderate fellowship amount which made me financially independent to pursue my career in dance studies. My thesis on the influence of the *madhurarasa* on the classical dance styles of India earned me the Ph.D. degree and from 1995 I am working in the Department of Dance first as a Lecturer and now a Reader in dance.

Along with my performances I always wanted to concentrate on writings and lecturing on dance. With a firm step in the University education these happen quite often. My analytical mind searched for explanation for every step and procedure. I found myself writing on Manipuri dance every now and then. Gradually it seemed that my experience and background should now be used to write a book on Manipuri dance for the performer-scholars of Manipuri. I started writing this book almost ten years back. This considerable volume includes the history and I have tried to assess the changes in presentation with time particularly when this dance form came out of Manipur to be performed as entertainment rather than rituals. In the Chapter I have tried to focus on the ethnological, political and religious leaning of the Meitei people and in the Chapter II the indigenous performance, Lāiharāobā, of this race has been stressed upon. The seed of dance lay in this Lāiharāobā festival, which serve as the core of the Meitei culture. The result of the influence of the Vaiṣṇavism is evident in the Saṁkirtana and the Rāsālilā. The influence has been in all the aspects like the aṅgika, vācika, āhārya and sātāvika. I have tried to identify the influence and the changes thereof in the technique, rhythmic time cycles, songs, costumes and the emotive sentiments. The songs have been represented in diacritical markings for easy readings and their meanings, I hope, will help non-Meitei and foreign students to understand the fundamental thoughts of the presentation. The rhythmic syllables of the basic dances also focus on the compositional aspect of this dance form. A Chapter is bestowed on the great poet-philosopher, Rabindranath Tagore, whose

appreciation of this dance form earned Manipur its foremost place in the classical dance scenario of India. The collection of materials for this has been from many libraries like the National Library, Kolkata, Ramkrishna Mission, Rabindra Bharati University Central Library, Anthropological Society of India Library, Manipuri Nartanalaya Imphal, Kolkata and Mumbai and Guru Bipin Singh's Collection, Sangit Natak Academy Library (New Delhi), Viswa Bharati Sangit Bhawan Library, Writer's Building Kolkata Library, Prof. Jiten Singh's collections, State Kala Academy Imphal and JNMDA Imphal Libraries.

My heartfelt obligation goes to the Thiyam family, who hosted me in Imphal to complete the material collection of this book. Bhabi Smt Damayanti Thiyam, a theatre artist by her own merit, looked after me like her sister. Maneka and Manasi Thiyam, the two daughters of Ratan and Damayanti Thiyam became my dear friends and helped to collect materials and visit different gurus. Amusana Devi, Sri Dolendra Singh and Ojha Chautombi Singh guided me through this process. Smt Vino Devi and Smt Brindasabi Devi took much pain to accurate the Rasalila series of this book. Ojha Chauhal Singh guided me through the different aspects of Samkirtana. An overall guidance to the book was rendered by the famous personality of Manipur Sri Ratan Thiyam, who took his valuable work-time off to discuss many facets of Manipur with me. All these support have made me indebted to Manipur and am overwhelmed with such love and affection.

My teachers who guided me through this enormous work were Prof. Ramaranjan Mukherjee, Prof. Pabitra Sarkar, Prof. Arun Kumar Basu, Prof. Satyanarayan Chakraverty, Drs Nitish & Mala Majumdar and Sri Ratan Thiyam. Sri Jyotibhusan Chaki went through all the padāvali verses which were collected from various sources and needed expert's corrections.

I am obliged to Dr Sumit Basu for helping me with the translations from Meitei. Sri Kunjo Singh, Prof. K. Jatindra Singh, Menaka Thiyam and Amusana Devi also helped me in this regard. My dear student Iliya Mukherjee and her husband Anindya Das assisted me with tabulating the rhythmic patterns. My sister Swati Bhattacharjee assisted me to identify the features of Sanskritization Process and its manifestation in Manipur. Soma Dutta aided with diacritical markings in Goṣṭhalilā. The dance postures of Samkirtana were provided by Dr. Thoiba Singh and Sri Premjit Singh and the Cāli and Bhaṅgi Pāreng postures were pictured on my daughter Somabha. Photographs from JNMDA, Manipur State Museum, Kangala Museum, Department of Art and Culture, Manipur and R.K Chandrajitsana Art Gallery were collected. For this I am extremely grateful to Dr Kh. Sarojini Devi, Director Art and Culture and Secretary, Manipur State Kala Academy for helping me and introducing me to R.K. Budhimanta Singh, the artist of great repute, Dr L. Dhanapati Devi, the curator of Manipur State Museum. Sri Dilip Mayengbam, Director JNMDA provided me with ample source on the history and gave valuable advice on the book. Many photos were collected for me by Dr Thoiba Singh of Manipur University while certain photos were collected from the websites listed in the bibliography. The total layout of the book is done by Suresh Kumar who worked day and night to give shape to this. A part of typing of this work was done by Smt Sima Saha Poddar. I am grateful to all of them and I believe that without their immense help this work would have never been possible.

My colleague Sri Abhoy Pal lent a hand to identify the Meitei hand gestures with those in the Nātyashāstra and Abhinaya Darpana. The students of Manipuri in Viswa Bharati Manju Elambam, Basu, Rakesh, Sudeshna and teachers Premjit Singh, Bocha Singh and Tomba Singh performed for proscenium photographs in pungcolom and kartālacolom.

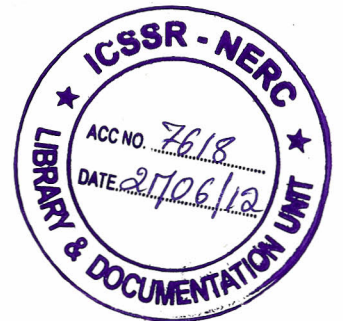
My husband Dr Somnath Sinha, Professor of Drama, constantly guided me through the work. His enormous insight and confidence in my aptitude provided me with the most desired back-up. My daughter Somabha bore with all my paper works and computer files. She never complained about me cutting off from her time demand. My father Sri Nabakumar Bandopadhyay was an embodiment of inspiration. At almost the last stage of this work he left us for the heavenly abode. It will always be my regret that he did not witness the complete book. My father-in-law Sri Shambhunath Sinha, my uncle Sri Sunil Banerjee, my brothers-in-law Samir and Sundar all were with me during this work. Above all my mother-in-law Smt Shanti Sinha, a Manipuri dancer herself, had persistently offered her silent support to me. I express my gratitude to them.

I am thankful to Sri Sanjay Arya of Shubhi Publication for taking up the publication of this book. It was very encouraging for me when he agreed to publish this work without bothering about the business of publication.

I would also like to thank Birendra Prasad and Sujatha Prasad for the putting in lot of time to design the book.

I hope this book will be helpful for the learners, scholars and performers of Manipuri dance and I pray to Lord Govindaji for a blessing.

Sruti Bandopadhyay









Foreword

Ratan Thiyam

(Vice Chairman, Sangeet Natak Academy)

In India the large geographical differences right from sea shore to snow capped mountains through the desiccated deserts have immense variety in nature. This is seen as well in the daily lives of people.

Richness in various rituals diverse customs celebrating the rites of passage has brought the exquisite flavour in Indian Arts, where the unity in diversity expresses the key sentiment of the culture.

Indian Classical Dances are one of the different object d'art of this course. After the struggle for independence, cultural scenario of the country took new dimension. As a result, in the first phase four dance forms received the recognition of 'classical' - Bharatnatyam, Kathakali, Kathak and Manipuri.

Manipuri Dance from the farthest North-East State of India records highly dignified approach to the art of movement not only as an aesthetic form but also as a part of daily pattern and regular routine of the society. Manipuri dance is the only dance form in India which still unites with the Rites of Passage in Manipuri society as also is highly acclaimed by the art connoisseurs for its performance on stage as a dance art. Its dazzling costumes, beautiful bols that resound from percussion, the distinguishing vocal rendition and above all the technique, gestures and figures portray the sequences and scenes described in the Indian holy books like Srimadbhagavata, Jaidev's Gita Govinda Govindalilamritam and other Vaishnava texts. A number of revered masters (guru) have devoted their lives for the development and dissemination of this beautiful dance form for last two centuries.

Dr. Sruti Bandopadhyay is a dancer as well as a scholar and she tries to explore the hidden aspects of Manipuri dance alongwith a touch of spiritual depth and aesthetics. I appreciate her tiredless endeavour in bringing out such a remarkable and comprehensive academic book on Manipuri dance covering both major and minor traditions.

I am sure it will be beneficial for the learners, scholars, performers and connoisseurs of Manipuri Dance.



In the rich tradition of the Indian Classical Dance, Manipuri Dance has a notable contribution. The book *Manipuri Dance: an Assessment on History and Presentation* is an in-depth study with roots deep into the anthropology, sociology and cultural milieu of the land of Manipur. It covers all the features, aspects and facets of Manipuri Dance and offers an exhaustive theoretical and practical view of the form. Songs, rhythmic patterns, hand gestures and feet movements are offered in particulars.

The three main branches of Manipuri dance - the *Lāiharaobā*, the *Samkirtana* and the *Rāsālilā* has been dealt in details, while the contributions of different personalities in and outside Manipur have been put forward for ready references to the students, scholars, researchers and dance lovers of Indian Dance. An exclusive chapter on the role of the great poet Rabindranath Tagore to uphold Manipuri Dances has also adorned this book.



Dr Sruti Bandopadhyay is one of the foremost Manipuri Dance artists of India, having awarded the 'Top' Grade by National Television. Trained under such famous personalities like Guru Bipin Singh, Smt Kalavati Devi, Padmasree Darshana Jhaveri, Ojhā Bābu Singh, Ojhā Gourakisor Sharma, she has performed in various national and international festivals for last 30 years. She received the Junior Research Fellowship (NET-JRF) of University Grants Commission of India to research for her doctoral thesis titled 'The influence of *Madhurarasa* on the development of Indian Classical Dances'. Sruti is now an established dance scholar with a PhD in dance. She is engaged as a Professor in Dance, at Rabindra Bharati University and served the Department as the Chair.

Apart from teaching at the post graduate level, supervising research and doctoral works, writing books and articles, she regularly performs, conducts workshops and lectures on dance. Her choreographies *Bajāo re mohana banshi*, *Offerings*, *Alo*, *Bhārat- tirtha*, *Vasantarāsa*, *Gita Govinda* and *Bhakirasasudhāsāra* have gained acclaim.

Sruti is associated with different Universities in India and abroad. She was awarded the Visiting Lecturer Fulbright Fellowship to teach Manipuri and lecture on Indian Dances in the Department of World Arts and Culture, University of California, USA. She also lectured in the University of California, San Diego, Berkeley, State University of California, Longbeach and University of Queensland, Brisbane. Her recent Manipuri Dance performances in South Africa were well received. She is awarded the 2009 *Lalitakalā Ratnā* award by Sri Lalita Kala Academy, Mysore.

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