



Thang-Ta and Ras Lila of Manipur

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Abstract

Manipur was formerly a sovereign country having a long monarchical history. But the importance and significance of Manipur in the world today does not lie in its being a state of India or an ancient monarchical kingdom but in its scenic beauty and the age-old brilliant culture and civilization especially for two of its classic performing art forms – the thrilling and electrifying martial art called the Thang-Ta and the most subtle and graceful dance form the world has ever seen called the Ras Lila. These two are Manipur's invaluable gift to the world of martial arts and to the realm of dance and music. Thus, in this paper tries to find out the historical background of the Thang-Ta and Ras Lila of Manipur and its place in the Manipuri society and culture.

Key Words: Thang-Ta, Ras Lila, Manipur, Culture etc.

Introduction:

Manipur was formerly a sovereign country having a long monarchical history. But the importance and significance of Manipur in the world today does not lie in its being a state of India or an ancient monarchical kingdom but in its scenic beauty and the age-old brilliant culture and civilization especially for two of its classic performing art forms – the thrilling and electrifying martial art called the Thang-Ta and the most subtle and graceful dance form the world has ever seen called the Ras Lila. These two are Manipur's invaluable gift to the world of martial arts and to the realm of dance and music.

Objective of the Study:

The main objectives of this study are:

1. To study the background of the Thang-Ta and Ras Lila of Manipur.
2. To study the role of Thang-Ta and Ras Lila in Manipuri Society.
3. To study the place of Thang-Ta and Ras Lila in Manipuri society and culture

Methodology of the Study:

A large number of Data are available in the form of written records like books, magazines, journals, reports, official records, articles and newspapers etc. For the collection of these data, it is needed to explore from the various record rooms like Imphal East and West district, Cachar district records room and Manipur State Archives, Gauhati Archives, Assam University, Silchar , Manipur University, Canchipur's Library and Silchar District Library etc.

The method of the study will be based on historical and empirical method. The tools and data require for the collection of the work will be based with the help of primary and secondary data. The oral sources will also be adopted in the work, in order to write in a systematic way. The analytical method will also be applied in this study.

Thang-Ta:

The Manipuris (the Meiteis) are a gifted people in the field of martial art both armed (*Thang-Ta*) and the unarmed (*Sarit-Sarat*) forms of combats and also other warlike games such as the *Sagol-Kangjei* (hockey on horseback), *Khong-Kangjei* (hockey on foot with elements of wrestling), *Mukna* (Manipuri wrestling), *Yubi-Lakpi* (Manipuri rugby) etc., etc.; all of which are thoroughly manly, dangerous and risky.

Besides their inborn skill, the Manipuris have a peculiar muscular body endowed with an exceptionally wonderful innate flexibility in body movement such as sudden strikes, thrusts, kicks, jumps, turns, twists, bends, rolls, etc. which also facilitate them to be adepts both in the armed and unarmed martial arts and other forms of manly games.

The Manipuris are also a martial race of people renowned for their extraordinary expertise in swordsmanship, equestrianism and other soldierly qualities. The expert Manipuri swordsmen on their famous breed of ponies were once the most powerful and awesome force in this part of the sub-continent. No nation, no tribe, no race of people in the region including the imperial forces of Ava can withstand the lightening and electrifying strike of the Manipuri swordsmen in battle fields. In fact, the Manipuri swordsmen on their ponies were in former days a terror throughout Upper Burma right up to the walls of the imperial capital of Ava till the Burmese Emperor Alaungpaya (1752-60 A. D.) acquired sophisticated European guns. Alaungpaya was so impressed with the Manipuri swordsmen and their ponies that he formed "the Kathe horse" in the Burmese army which he and his successors used them in their campaigns against Thailand and other countries.

The achievement of such a glorious martial tradition by the Manipuris of later times was but on the foundation built by their ancient godlike forefathers who invented and developed one of the most advanced forms of martial art called the Thang-Ta, now renowned throughout the world as a classic performing art.

The origin of this martial art goes back to remote undated antiquity. Who invented it and when, we do not know for certain. However, Manipuri texts like *Pudil* and *Leithak Leikharol*

ascribed its origin to the myth of creation wherein a ritualistic movement with sword and spear called Thengou was supposed to have been performed by the nine primeval deities at the time of the creation of the earth, the details of which is beyond this brief note.

Thang is the Manipuri word for sword and *Ta*, for spear. In archaic Manipuri the former is called *Kacheng* or *Kajeng*, and the latter *Timen*. They together constitute the armed martial art of Manipur. Both Thang and Ta are the arts of warfare and in monarchical times they were the chief weaponry of war. Though Thang and Ta are weapons of attack and defence, one cannot ignore their spiritual and ritualistic aspects.

In Thang-Ta, learned teachers have always emphasized that one must be more or less at home in both Thang and Ta. Though they are distinguishable from one another, yet functionally, the two must always be co-ordinated and go together. This explains why the Manipuris have always used the compound word *Thang-Ta* indicating the functional inseparability between them just as the hands and legs are inseparable with their functional value. The difference between the two lies mainly in the emphasis given to either of them. While a co-ordinated hand-work and foot-work are essential in both of them, more emphasis is given on the sleight of hands or skill in hand works such as strikes, thrusts and all round protection from all attacks, etc., in the case of *Thang* and the skilful movements of legs such as jumps, kicks, thrusts and attack on the front, etc., in the case of Ta. In view of their interdependence and functional inseparability hardly is a learned teacher in Thang not familiar with the technique of Ta and vice versa, though he may be more specialized in either of them.

The learning and practice of *Thang-Ta* – its complicated technique, posture, stance, dexterity and deftness in hand and foot movements, sword dance and spear dance, sword play and spear play, etc., etc.; and also the learning of the technique of unarmed combat known as Sarit-Sarat which is prerequisite to the *Thang-Ta*, are not treated in this brief note.

Relevance of *Thang-Ta* in the present day society:- Now being the age of sophisticated guns, many thought that the days of Thang-Ta and its utility are over. But we may say that *Thang-Ta* is still very much relevant in the present day society, some of the reasons are enumerated herewith:

- i. Thang-Ta has a vast dimension. It touches or covers almost all the aspects of the culture and civilization of Manipur, besides the physical or individual aspects. Even history is not outside it, for the history of Manipur is evidently the history of Thang-Ta. No doubt, Thang-Ta as an art of primitive warfare and war weaponry is a thing of the past. But it continues to exist as one of the finest and most popular classic performing art today. Is there any audience in the world who was not spellbound and overwhelmed at the demonstration of this ancient martial art? In the light of the above facts how could one speak about the irrelevancy or outdatedness of Thang-Ta?
- ii. Thang-Ta is the cradle of Manipuri culture especially the various forms of Manipuri dances. Like the Chinese martial art, Tai Chi Chuan which influenced the Chinese dancing, the Thang-Ta also influenced the various Manipuri dance forms such as the *Lai*

Haraoba, Nata Samkirtana, Ras Lila, Pung Cholom, Pala Cholom, etc. In other words all these dance forms had their roots in the martial art of Thang-Ta.

In view of the above facts, further preservation and propagation of this martial art (*Thang-Ta*) is the need of the hour otherwise the very core of our highly acclaimed dance forms may be degraded and may ultimately die out.

- iii. *Thang-Ta* had a tremendous role in the political and military history of Manipur. It was by virtue of its superb technique that the Manipuris in the past could raise their heads high above the barriers of hills and mountains and could established themselves as one of the most important political and military powers in the region.

There is, therefore, the utmost necessity to impart Thang-Ta and the glorious martial traditions of our forefathers to the present day younger generations of the society.

- iv. The crisis in the present day society is the crisis in discipline especially in Manipur.

The strict discipline and the code of conduct as laid down and maintained in the study of Thang-Ta could a cure to the present day discipline crisis society. If Thang-Ta is introduced in educational institutions the teacher-students relationship would also be improved.

- v. The intellectual and mental development should not be the only desired goal of education. It should be the harmonious development of physical, mental, spiritual and moral. In Thang-Ta, the mutual development of health, skill, spiritual and moral principles are always emphasized. Hence Thang-Ta should be learnt by all in order to achieve the harmonious development of personality.
- vi. Last but not the least, Thang-Ta must be imparted to all including the womenfolk as a mode of self-defence. By learning Thang-Ta, one would necessarily learn the technique of unarmed combat called Sarit-Sarat. Sarit-Sarat is a prerequisite to Thang-Ta. The evasive and offensive moves of Sarit-Sarat, the unarmed martial art could be very effective to face or to defeat any attacker.

Hence the importance and relevance of Thang-Ta in the present day society is tremendous and one need not raise any question against it.

Ras Lila :

The world famous *Ras-Lila* of Manipur is an invaluable gift of the artistic geniuses of the Manipuris in the world of dance and music. It is a dance drama woven through the Vaishnavite religious theme of Lord Krishna's plays with Radha and other Gopis at Vrindavan. The Lila was based on the five chapters (chapter 29 to chapter 33) of the 10th Sakandha of Shrimad Bhagavatam. But the styles, the dance movement and other modes of presentations are distinctively indigenous in origin. The Ras Lila has now become a form of the Indian classical dances.

This classical dance had its origin to the creative and artistic genius of Rajarshi Bhagyachandra. The origin of this Lila was connected with the installation ceremony of the idol of Shri Gobindajee. The nirupan (carving out the idol) of Shri Govindajee was done at the Bishnupur palace in 1776 A. D. After Rajarshi Bhagyachandra shifted his palace from Bishnupur to Langthabal, the image of Shri Govindajee was installed at the Ras Mandal of Canchipur in 1779 A.D. Rajarshi was determined to dedicate the Lila of Lord Krishna with the Gopis at the time of the said installation ceremony. A renowned and well versed performing artist himself the Rajarshi enacted the major role of the mridanga player at the Nata Samkirtana in the consecration ceremony of Shri Govindajee.

With the help of pundits, well versed in ancient dance and music, Rajarshi Bhagyachandra composed the famous Ras Lila and dedicated the dance in honour of Lord Krishna. This was the birth of the Ras Lila of Manipur, now renowned throughout the world as the most subtle, most delicate and most graceful classical dance the world has ever known in the realm of dance and music, outstripping and overshadowing other classical dance forms of India by virtue of its own distinct richness and style.

Maharaja (Rajarshi) Bhagyachandra initiated and dedicated three forms of Ras Lilas, viz, the Maha Ras, Kunja Ras and Vasanta Ras to Shri Govindajee. (Details of these three major Ras Lilas and also some other types of Ras Lilas which were later additions are not treated in this brief note.)

Though the Ras Lila depicts the love story of Lord Krishna and Radha and other Gopies, its peculiar characteristic is the complete absence of any sensuous movement. The dancer neither moves the hip nor the eyes. There is only gentle turning and rhythmic swaying of the body through slow jerks of feet and hands. The dancers body continually seems to dissolve and re-arise in flowing sinous curves as the gentle hand and arm gestures melt one into the other. Seeing the Ras Lila of Manipur, Faubian Bowers observes: "Excessively limpid softness was a tremendously new and fresh inspiration of India, whose dance style had been up to then primarily energetic, electric and explosive. Manipur has given Indian dance as a whole to day a sweetness entirely absent from the angular precision of Bharat Natyam, the vigorousness of Kathakali; or the mathematics of Kathak." (*Bowers, F., Theatre in the East, A survey of Asian Dance and drama, New York, 1960, P. 51*).

Just as its gracious movements, the music and song of Ras Lila are intensely subtle and sensitive. The sound of the various musical instruments and the sweet and melodious song are perfectly incorporated into the various sequences of the Lila. Bowers further describes the brilliance of the music of the Ras Lila thus: "I know of nothing more musically competent, spiritually moving or even vaguely resembling anywhere in the world Their singing completely different from that found in India, is full of vibratos, trills, catches in the throat, and an ecstatic warmth that the rigid methodical performance of India lack as far as the unaccustomed western ear is concerned. The perfect proportion between dancing and aria,

choruses and orchestral interludes a finely constructed composition as any aesthetic law teaches.” (*Ibid. P. 52*).

From what has been stated above it is evidently clear that the Ras-Lila of Manipur is the finest and the most graceful of all the classical dances of India. This Ras-Lila is a gigantic figure that dwarfed other forms of classical dances of India such as the Bharat Natyam, Kathak, Kathakali and others, at least in the eyes of the Western observers.

Conclusion:

The Thang-Ta must be imparted to all including the womenfolk as a mode of self-defence. By learning Thang-Ta, one would necessarily learn the technique of unarmed combat called Sarit-Sarat. Sarit-Sarat is a prerequisite to Thang-Ta. The evasive and offensive moves of Sarit-Sarat, the unarmed martial art could be very effective to face or to defeat any attacker.

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