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Manipuri

Manipuri, one of the main styles of **Indian Art** or **Classical Dances** originated in the picturesque and secluded state of Manipur in the north-eastern corner of India. Because of its geographical location, the people of Manipur have been protected from outside influences, and this region has been able to retain its unique traditional culture.

The origin of Manipuri dance can be traced back to ancient times that go beyond recorded history. The dance in Manipur is associated with rituals and traditional festivals, there are legendary references to the dances of Shiva and Parvati and other gods and goddesses who created the universe.

Lai Haraoba is one of the main festivals still performed in Manipur which has its roots in the pre-Vaishnavite period. **Lai Haraoba** is the earliest form of dance which forms the basis of all stylised dances in Manipur. Literally meaning - the merry-making of the gods, it is performed as a ceremonial offering of song and dance. The principal performers are the **maibas** and **maibis** (priests and priestesses) who re-enact the theme of the creation of the world.



Khuning Kaulhokpa, basic stance

With the arrival of Vaishnavism in the 15th century A.D., new compositions based on episodes from the life of Radha and Krishna were gradually introduced. It was in the reign of King Bhagyachandra that the popular **Rasleela** dances of Manipur originated. It is said, that this 18th century philosopher king conceived this complete dance form along with its unique costume and music in a dream. Under successive rulers, new **leelas**, and rhythmic and melodic compositions were introduced.

Manipuri dance has a large repertoire, however, the most popular forms are the **Ras**, the **Sankirtana** and the **Thang-Ta**. There are five principal **Ras** dances of which four are linked with specific seasons, while the fifth can be presented at any time of the year. In Manipuri Ras, the main characters are Radha, Krishna and the **gopis**.



Radha and Krishna

The themes often depict the pangs of separation of the **gopis** and Radha from Krishna. The **parengs** or pure dance sequences performed in the **Rasleela** dances follow the specific rhythmic patterns and body movements, which are traditionally handed down. The **Ras costume** consists of a richly embroidered stiff skirt which extends to the feet.

A short fine white muslin skirt is worn over it. A dark coloured velvet blouse covers the upper part of the body and a traditional white veil is worn over a special hair-do which falls gracefully over the face. Krishna wears a yellow dhoti, a dark velvet jacket and a crown of peacock feathers. The jewellery is very delicate and the designs are unique to the region.



Pung Cholam

The Kirtan form of congregational singing accompanies the dance which is known as Sankirtana in Manipur. The male dancers play the Pung and Kartal while dancing. The masculine aspect of dance - the Choloms are a part of the Sankirtana tradition. The Pung and Kartal choloms are performed at all social and religious festivals.



Kartal Cholam



Thang-Ta

The martial dancers of Manipur - the Thang-ta - have their origins in the days when man's survival depended on his ability to defend himself from wild animals.

Today, Manipur has an evolved and sophisticated repertoire of martial dances, the dancers use swords, spears and shields. Real fight scenes between the dancers show an extensive training and control of the body.

Manipuri dance incorporates both the **tandava** and **lasya** and ranges from the most vigorous masculine to the subdued and graceful feminine. Generally known for its lyrical and graceful movements, Manipuri dance has an elusive quality. In keeping with the subtleness of the style, Manipuri **abhinaya** does not play up the **mukhabhinaya** very much - the facial expressions are natural and not exaggerated - **sarvangabhinaya**, or the use of the whole body to convey a certain **rasa**, is its forte.

The rhythmic complexities are usually overlooked as the dancers do not wear ankle bells to stamp out the rhythms in a theatrical display, as this interferes with the delicate body movements. However, Manipuri dance and music has a highly evolved **tala system**.



Musicians

The Manipuri classical style of singing is called **Nat** - very different from both north and south Indian music, this style is immediately recognizable with its high pitched open throated rendering with particular type of trills and modulations. The main musical instrument is the **Pung** or the Manipuri classical drum. There are also many other kinds of drums used in Manipuri dance and music. The Pena, a stringed instrument is used in **Lai Haraoba** and **Pena** singing. Various kinds of cymbals are used in Sankirtana and Ras. The flute is also used to accompany vocal singing.

The **Ashtapadis** of Jayadeva's **Geeta Govinda** are very popular and are sung and danced in Manipur with great religious fervour.

Besides the **Ras** and other **leelas**, each stage in one's life is celebrated with **Sankirtana** performances - child birth, **upanayanam**, wedding and **shradha** are all occasions for singing and dancing in Manipur. The whole community participates as song and dance form part of daily life expressions.

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