



Traditions of Indian Classical Dance

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TEXT & ILLUSTRATIONS



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Manipuri

LAI HARAوبا * RASA LILA * SANKEERTAN

Nestling securely amid the rugged ridges that demarcate the Indo-Burma border on one side and the Assam Hills region on the other, the tiny State of Manipur has, through the ages, evolved and preserved its own distinct traditions of art and culture, including a variety of dances and related rituals, which collectively go under the name of 'Manipuri *nartana*'. Dance and music run in the blood of the Manipuri people, and it is rare, indeed, to find a Manipuri who cannot dance or sing.

The early, pre-Hindu dances of Manipur were of an animistic nature; and then came dances associated with the worship of Shiva and Parvati, or, rather the native counterparts of these deities. It is not quite certain when Vaishnavism came to be adopted in this part of the country, but certain waves came in the 15th, 16th, 17th and 18th centuries. And these may have influenced the development of Manipuri dancing. At present there are two principal sects of people in Manipur, the Meitheis and the Vishnupriyas, and together they share the passion for dance.

The Manipuris have always been a simple and an intensely devout people, content to live in a world of their own, content to sing and dance their way through life. Song and dance are, in fact, so inextricably woven into the pattern of their life that the Manipuris regard themselves as having been descended from the *gandharvas*. And to substantiate this claim, the Manipuris never tire of recounting one of their pet stories...that of Arjuna and Chitrangada, which is included in the Adiparva of the Mahabharata. According to this legend, once Arjuna, in fulfilment of a penance, had to spend several years in exile, and his random wanderings brought him to Manipur. Here he saw Chitrangada, the beautiful daughter of Chitravahana, the Lord



of the *gandharvas* and King of Manipur, and, smitten by her charms, he wooed her and won her hand in marriage.

Arjuna and Chitrangada had a son named Babruvahana, but it so happened that when, after some years, Arjuna left Manipur, a rash imprecation by an offended one made him completely forget the fact of his marriage to Chitrangada and also of the son she had borne him. Babruvahana grew up to be a strong and personable young man, and a prize opportunity to prove his mettle came his way when he captured the sacred horse released by the Pandavas as a part of the Ashwamedha Sacrifice, thereby challenging its master to a fight. This master happened to be none other than Arjuna, and, thus, unwittingly, there took place a fight between father and son, a fight which turned out to be a very unhappy one, for the father was killed by the son. Widowed, Chitrangada felt utterly disconsolate; and, in her gnawing grief, she beseeched Sri Krishna for help. Krishna was moved, and he revealed himself and bade Babruvahana bring the life-bestowing gem *sanjeevani-mani* from Nagadeva, the Serpent-King of Patala, the nether world. This was done. And, with the help of *sanjeevani-mani*, Arjuna was brought back to life. And from that time on, it is said, the place where this incident took place came to be known as Manipur, 'Gem-country'.

The Manipuris have a rich lore of legend and mythology, and this includes a number of stories which reflect the people's love for dance. A very old and very popular story is the one of the Rasa Lila dance performed by Shiva and Parvati. It is said that once Krishna and Radha were enjoying the Rasa dance at a secluded place, and to make sure that nobody disturbed them, they had requested Shiva to stand guard without. Parvati happened to pass that way, and, seeing Shiva's unwonted behaviour, she became both suspicious and inquisitive. It took her some time, but she eventually learnt the truth from Shiva; and, then, in spite of his protests, she stole a glance at the Rasa performance of Radha and Krishna. And one look proved to be enough. For, after that, she longed for nothing but to enjoy the same kind of bliss in the company of her own consort, Shiva. Shiva, for his part, knew that he would, sooner or later, have to comply with her desire, and so he set out in search of a suitable place to hold his Rasa with Parvati. He eventually came to what appeared to be the ideal spot—secluded, lush and verdant, but a place girdled by hills, which happened to be full of water. However, the spot was too attractive to be easily relinquished, and so Shiva thrust his trident right through the side of one of the hills, and in this way drained off the entire water. In the valley that thus emerged, Shiva then arranged his Rasa with Parvati, and this Rasa went on for seven days and seven nights. The *gandharvas* and various gods provided the music, and Nagadeva, with his *mani*, or refulgent gem, flooded the place with light. And it is this valley, this hallowed place, say the Manipuris, that thus came to be known as Manipur.

Another favourite story of the Manipuris, which is part legend and part history, concerns the celebrated lovers, Khamba and Thoibi, and this is



given in full in the great Manipuri epic, Moirang Parba. Khamba was a brave but poor lad of the Kshumal clan and Thoibi a princess of the Moirang dynasty. Both were born at Moirang, a village some thirty miles from Imphal, the capital of Manipur. When they grew up, Khamba and Thoibi fell in love. But the path of their love proved to be far from smooth. Both had to suffer many trials and tribulations. However, nothing could deter their resolve to live and die together. Khamba had a number of rivals who plotted against him and put many an obstacle in his way, and Thoibi had her fair share of misery by being disowned by her people. Finally, the two lovers were united, but their happiness turned out to be very short-lived. Soon after their marriage, on a very dark night, Khamba suddenly decided to play a practical joke on Thoibi to test her love for him. He took his lance and thrust it through the bamboo partition that separated his room from Thoibi's. Thoibi was taken aback, but she did not lose composure. She snatched the lance and forthwith hurled it back. It struck Khamba on the chest and killed him instantly. Sensing this, Thoibi rushed to where Khamba lay and, frenzied, took the blood-stained lance and plunged it into her own body and there and then fell down dead, by the side of Khamba, her partner in life and in death.

Their touching love-story apart, Khamba and Thoibi are also remembered by the Manipuris for the dances they performed. It is said that they were both expert dancers; they danced so well, in fact, that they were regarded as incarnations of Shiva and Parvati, respectively; and their favourite dance, which was patterned after the Rasa Lila of Shiva and Parvati, came to be known as Lai Haraoba—meaning, 'Festivity of the gods'.

When we turn from mythology and legend to chronicle, we find that no authoritative or dependable account of the history of Manipur prior to the 18th century A.D. is available. This is due in part to the fact that no estimable effort has so far been made to prepare a connected account of the history of Manipur, and partly to what may be spoken of as the bigoted proselytising zeal of King Pamheiba who, when he embraced the Ramanandi order of Vaishnavism about 1714 A.D., ordered all prior historical records of the State to be destroyed. Still, from whatever sketchy information is available, it is evident that dancing as an art has existed in Manipur from very early times and that it has for the most part been patronised by the native rulers.

The earliest reference we have in this regard is in a copper-plate inscription of 154 A.D. which lauds King Khowai Tampak as a great patron of music and dance and credits him with having introduced the Manipuri drum and cymbals into Manipuri dance. Then, we learn that the Tai king, Koh-Lo-Feng of Burma, who invaded Manipur in 707 A.D., sent, as a token of goodwill, a troupe composed of dancers and musicians from Burma, Assam and Manipur to China. After this, during the reign of King Loyamba, who ascended the throne in 1074 A.D., took place the tragic love affair of Khamba and Thoibi, and to this period can also be assigned the beginnings of the Lai Haraoba dance. We are also told that in 1467 A.D., during the time of



King Kyamba, King Pong of Burma took expert drummers and dancers from Manipur to his country, and in return he sent *ransinga* players to Manipur.

It is only from the 18th century onwards that we get a more or less continuous account of the history of Manipur. The dawn of this century saw Pamheiba installed as the King of Manipur, and, soon after he ascended the throne, he earned the honorific Garib Nawaz—'Protector of the Poor'. Pamheiba came under the influence of the Vaishnava missionary, Goswami Santidas; and, as a result of this, an epoch-making change in the religious and cultural history of Manipur took place. Pamheiba gave up his Meithei Braitya religion in favour of the Ramanandi faith, and soon the entire State adopted this branch of Vaishnavism as its religion. The conversion of Pamheiba was sudden and complete, and he wanted his subjects also to follow suit. With this end in view, and, under the direction of his preceptor Goswami Santidas, Pamheiba had all records of the earlier religion burnt and he also forbade the worship of Meithei images and the use of the Meithei language and script. This, naturally, proved to be a terrible blow to Meithei art and culture, and one result of this was that the Meithei tradition of dance and music suffered a severe setback. The years that followed saw Vaishnavism consolidate its position; and a whole range of Vaishnava dances in Manipur emerged.

After Pamheiba, or Garib Nawaz, lasting developments in the technique and methods of presentation of Manipuri dance took place during the time of his grandson, Jai Singh, who ruled from 1764 to 1789 A.D. and who is also known as Karta Maharaja or Bhagyachandra. Bhagyachandra was a great devotee of Sri Krishna. And when, during his reign, Vaishnava missionaries, led by Parmanand Thakur, came from Bengal to Manipur, Bhagyachandra, at the instance of Parmanand Thakur, who was a follower of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, adopted Gaudiya Vaishnavism as his religion. In course of time, this also became the religion of the State, completely replacing the Ramanandi faith. As a result of this, the Bengali language began to get popular in Manipur and, eventually, the archaic Manipuri alphabet was replaced by the Bengali script. This had an effect on Manipuri dance as well, for songs of devotional poets like Chaitanya, Jayadeva, Chandidas and Vidyapati came to be freely used in this art.

Bhagyachandra was not only a great patron of art and letters, but was also himself an artist and a scholar. Bhagyachandra once had a dream, in which Sri Krishna appeared before him and asked him to make his image from the wood of a certain jackfruit tree on a certain hill and to offer worship to it regularly. The tree was located, and the image carved and duly installed in the temple of Govindji at Imphal which was especially erected for the purpose by Bhagyachandra. Lord Krishna again appeared before Bhagyachandra in a vision and revealed the mystic Rasa dance to him and asked him to perform it, as a ritual offering in Krishna's honour. And thus, it is said, was born the Rasa dance of Manipur.



Apart from what is said to have been revealed to him by Sri Krishna, Bhagyachandra may have taken inspiration from the dances of the *satras*, or Vaishnava monasteries of Assam, and also from the *keertans* of Bengal, and the folk dances of certain regions with which he was familiar, though the existing highly traditional dance-forms of Manipur were the main base from which he recomposed and rechoreographed the Rasa. And, in this way was evolved the new technique of the Rasa dance. Later, on the advice of Guru Swarupananda and Guru Rasananda, Bhagyachandra invited dance gurus from all over Manipur: and, together, they systematised and codified the technique of the Rasa. Bhagyachandra also devised the Rasa costume, which is known as *kumin*, and this was based on what Bhagyachandra had seen in the vision he had of the Rasa of Krishna. In the first Rasa Lila which took place in 1769 A.D., the part of Radhika was taken by Bhagyachandra's daughter Lairoibi, who is also known as Bimbavati or Bimbavatimanjuri. It is said that later Bimbavati went to Nabadwip, in Bengal, and spent the rest of her days in the service of the temple of Anuprabhu there. It is also pertinent to mention that from the time of Bhagyachandra began the practice of having a special annexe known as *Rasa mandapa*, or *nat mandapa* in every Vaishnava temple in Manipur for the specific purpose of holding Rasa performances.

Bhagyachandra was responsible for creating the traditional Rasa Lila dance of Manipur, and also three specific Rasa compositions—Maha Rasa, Vasanta Rasa and Kunja Rasa—as well as the *Achouba Bhangi Pareng*, which is an indispensable part of all Rasa dances of Manipur. Later, during the time of Gambhir Singh, 1825-1834 A.D., this basic *pareng* became *Gostha Bhangi Pareng*. And, still later, during Chandra Kirti Singh's rule, 1850-1886 A.D., two more *parengs* were added, namely, the *Brindaban Pareng* and *Khurumba Pareng*. Chandra Kirti Singh is also credited with having created a Rasa dance, known as Nartana Rasa, as well as sixty-four other dances, based on the Manipuri drum technique. After the time of Chandra Kirti Singh, Manipuri dance made no special progress, and it can therefore be said that the Golden Age of Manipuri *nartana* lasted about a hundred years, from the rule of Bhagyachandra to that of Chandra Kirti Singh.

Of the traditional and stylised dances of Manipur, the Lai Haraoba is the oldest. It belongs essentially to the Meitheis, or the pre-Vaishnava people of the valley, whose word for dance is *jagoi*. It can be said that the Lai Haraoba is the most advanced and polished type of *jagoi*. Though it is performed in the entire Manipur valley, the main event takes place in April or May every year in the village of Moirang, hallowed by its association with the immortal lovers, Khamba and Thoibi.

The Lai Haraoba can be described as a long-spun re-enactment, in a cryptic dance language, of the creation of the world. In the course of its development, however, this dance-form has freely borrowed themes from the Moirang Parba, the great Manipuri epic about Khamba and Thoibi, and, to a lesser extent, from other Meithei stories of the different incarnations of Shiva and Parvati, such as those of Nongpok Ningthou and Panthoibi, or



Thangjing and Lairambi.

When performed in the traditional manner, the Lai Haraoba can be described as an elaborate ritual punctuated with various dances. The performances generally take place on the village green. Every day, from about three in the afternoon till sundown, men and women, young and old, dance together, and the entire celebration may last ten days, or even more. The male dancers appear dressed as ancient warriors, while the females don the attire of the temple priestesses of Manipur. In its actual rendering, the Lai Haraoba attempts, in a vague and rambling manner, to unfold and re-enact the story of the creation of the world, and this it does through a series of loose-knit movements and dances, some of which are symbolic, some suggestive, and some even lewd or ludicrous.

Though practically anyone can participate in a Lai Haraoba presentation, its principal performers are the *maibis* and *maibas*, who are counted as men and women especially chosen by the sylvan gods and goddesses to honour them. To qualify for admission into the fold, the prospective *maibis* or *maibas* have to betray certain signs and symptoms, the most important of which is the capacity to fall into a trance and then to utter words which, though unintelligible, may have a deep hidden meaning or message. As they are considered to be the embodiment of purity, the *maibis*, who may be male or female, are dressed in spotless white. The *maibas* are male priests, and they have a colourful costume of their own which includes a turban, a jacket and a flowing *dhoti*.

There are special shrines, usually very modest affairs, in front of which the Lai Haraoba is performed. These shrines house 364 *umang lais*, an exclusive set of divinities, identified as antediluvian gods, spirits and deified heroes. These shrines come to life only once every year, at the time of the Lai Haraoba festival. The rest of the year they remain totally abandoned and neglected. Each shrine gets a face-lift at the time of its own Lai Haraoba, when the idols are cleaned and adorned and ceremonially installed, within a shrine or outside, in a way that they may have a grandstand view of the proceedings.

The dance in the Lai Haraoba is diffuse and meandering. Practically all of it is performed as ritual. The principal dancers are the *maibis* and *maibas*, but they are joined, at various stages, by almost all the women and girls, and a handful of men and boys, of the village or locality. To unfold the story of creation, which is what the Lai Haraoba is essentially about, the dancers make use of certain stylised hand gestures and body movements, but the face on the whole remains blank. The steps are mostly gingerly and resilient, there is a continuity of flow in the posturing of the body, and the arms and hands move with a delicate sinuousness.

An ancient text, *Leithak Laikha Jagoi*, governs much of the technique followed in the Lai Haraoba. The dance is accompanied throughout by the *pena*, a diminutive single-stringed instrument played with a bow which also sports a few tiny bells and which gives a haunting, wailing melody



punctuated with a soft, tinkling sound. There is occasional singing, shouting, and exchange of repartee on the part of the participants. At times this degenerates into sheer vulgarity, with undisguised references to the sexual organs, copulation and the like, but apparently the people find nothing perverted in this, for is not Lai Haraoba the drama of creation and is not the sex act an indispensable part of that drama?

An important content of the Lai Haraoba festival is the dance of Khamba and Thoibi, done by a boy and a girl. Often, where the Lai Haraoba is staged on too modest a scale, Khamba Thoibi is the only dance performed, though of course by several pairs of participants, who appear in turns.

The Lai Haraoba is sometimes dismissed as nothing more than an elaborate or glorified folk-dance. Possibly the deceptively simple technique of the style and the fact that its presentation resembles a celebration more than a performance account for the misconception. The Lai Haraoba is a very, very old dance. It has evolved its own exclusive vocabulary of step, movement and gesture, all of which has been systematically classified and codified. And, what is most important, it is this vocabulary that constitutes the core from which all later formal dance in Manipur has emanated.

The principal dances of Manipur, however, are the Rasa Lila dances. The tradition of these dances began with the induction of Vaishnavism into Manipur, but they attained maturity and perfection only during the time of King Bhagyachandra, to whom reference has already been made.

There are three main types of Rasa Lila, namely, Kunja Rasa, Vasanta Rasa and Maha Rasa. Kunja Rasa deals with the meeting of Krishna and Radha, accomplished with the help of *sakhis* or friends, in a *kunja*, or arbour. Vasanta Rasa takes up the story of the playing with colours to herald the spring, Krishna's dalliance with Chandravali, a *sakhi*, leading to Radha's jealousy and the final reconciliation between Krishna and Radha. Maha Rasa attempts to recapture the spirit and import of the Rasa Lila, the celebrated round dance which Krishna performed with the *gopis*, in Brindaban. The Rasa dances are intended to be performed only on specific full-moon nights: Kunja Rasa, in the month of Ashwin (September-October), Vasanta Rasa, in Chaitra (March-April), and Maha Rasa, in Kartik (October-November). The first performance in each case takes place at the Sri Govindji temple attached to the Palace at Imphal, the capital of Manipur, and it is only after this that the other temples can take up their Rasa presentation. Sri Govindji is the most hallowed Vaishnava temple in Manipur and the focus of all major religious activity in the land. At the time of the Rasa here, the images of Radha and Krishna are dislodged from the shrine and installed at the place set apart for the Rasa.

There are other Rasa dances, too. Nitya, or Nartana, Rasa, which can be performed on any auspicious occasion, portrays the putting of Krishna and Radha to bed. Diva Rasa is staged only during the day time and it shows the coming together of Krishna and Radha in the bathing pool, brought about with the *sakhis* as accomplices. Gopa Rasa presents snatches



from the life of Krishna with the *gopas*, in Brindaban, including the killing by him of the demon Dhenukasur. Ulukhal Rasa offers snippets from the childhood pranks of Krishna, such as stealing butter, playing mischief with the *gopis*, and freeing himself from the *ulukhal*, or heavy stone vessel for pounding rice, to which his mother had once securely tied him.

The Rasa dances, it hardly needs saying, all pertain to Krishna. Except in the case of Gopa Rasa and Ulukhal Rasa, the performers are women and girls, with the exception of Krishna who is sometimes impersonated by a boy of tender age. Rasa performances invariably take place in the *nat mandapa*, a dance-hall attached to practically every Vaishnava temple in the State. Whenever a Rasa is to be staged, the dance arena in the *mandapa* is lavishly decorated with flowers, creepers and leaves, both real and artificial, buntings, paper cutouts and the like. The costume of the dancers is colourful and glittering in the extreme. While Krishna appears in a yellow *dhoti* and a dark tunic and wearing various ornaments and garlands of flowers and a crown adorned with peacock feathers, his companions—Radha and the *sakhis*, wear bulging cylindrical skirts of satin studded with bits of mirror, dark velvet blouses and flimsy, translucent white veils which cover the face; the skirts are red in colour except in the case of Radha who wears green.

The Rasa dances are essentially lyrical, and they all have extremely graceful and liquid, even sinuous, movements, coupled with soft and light steps in which the heel practically never touches down. The dancers for the most part sway to the sides or spin at one place, with the hands close to the sides and with effortless ease and with a more or less fixed, benign, angelic expression on the face. The central figure of the dance is, of course, Krishna, and as his companions dance round him, they often take poses and positions which give the effect of well-composed tableaux. Like the dance, the accompanying music, too, is long-drawn and languorous. The songs, as advised earlier, are mostly of leading Vaishnava devotional poets like Jayadeva, Vidyapati and Chandidas and the language is Sanskrit, Brajbuli, Maithali or Meithei.

The principal singers are the dancers who act as *sakhis*, and more often than not they are professionals. The singing is generally in a high-pitched voice and rendered with tremendous feeling and gusto; in some of the intensely emotional pieces, the singers seem to cry their heart out, an experience that readily brings tears to many an eye among the assembled. To support the singing are two women-singers, known as *sutradharis*, and a group of male singers, all of whom sit with the instrumentalists, on one side of the performing area. The principal instruments used are the *poong*, an earthen drum with a sharp metallic tone, the flute, cymbals and the *esraj*, which has many strings and is played with a bow.

The Rasa may look quite simple to perform, but in actuality it carries a rigid and far from easy technique. One can appreciate the eminent role of the body in *nrita*, or decorative dance, but in Manipuri Rasa in *nritya*, or



expressional work, too, it is not the face and hands alone but the body as a whole that contributes to the utterance, albeit in a soft and subdued tone. Manipuri Rasa has its own classical texts on technique, the most important of which is the *Govinda Sangeet Lila Vilasa*, said to have been written by Maharaja Bhagyachandra himself. This work also lists the *hastas* employed in the style. The basic dance pieces in Rasa are known as *chalis*. The important, and trying passages, however, are the *bhangi parengs*, which are five in number and which involve set bends, movements and poses of the body. Three of the *bhangi parengs* are *lasya* in character and two *tandava*. They project, through visual imagery, such themes as the divine beauty of Krishna, the resplendent glory of Brindaban, and the adoration of Radha and Krishna. The *bhangi parengs* represent the very kernel of the Rasa dances of Manipur and they are considered so sacrosanct that not the slightest deviation in their technique or manner of presentation is permitted.

The Manipuri Rasa is a very elaborate and leisurely affair, and it may take several nights to complete a performance. There are preliminaries in the form of an invocation through the playing of drums and cymbals and singing. This takes place at dusk, after which begins the Rasa, which continues till dawn. The opening piece is generally an *abhisar*, or the setting out to keep a tryst, by Krishna, Radha or a gopi. Then there are songs and dances galore and, of course, the *bhangi parengs*. As an example, Maha Rasa unfolds itself thus: Krishna *abhisar*, Radha and gopi *abhisar*, singing by *gopis*, *Achouba Bhangi Pareng*, Krishna's dance, Radha's dance, dance of the *gopis*, disappearance of Krishna, lament of *gopis*, reappearance of Krishna, Brindaban *Bhangi Pareng*, disappearance of Krishna again, lament of the *gopis*, reappearance of Krishna, singing by the *gopis*, *pushpanjali*, or offering of flowers, and *arati*, offering of sacred light.

The Manipuri Rasa dances show the ethos of the people in its fulness. Though every Rasa performance has its attendant audience, the dancers may be said to be oblivious of this, for their projection is directed not towards the gathering but towards the Divine Lovers, Radha and Krishna, all of which is done in a spirit of total self-abnegation and surrender. Though as a classical dance the Manipuri Rasa carries its own share of *abhinaya*, or expressional content, compared to what one encounters in other Indian dance-styles, this looks so tame and muffled and so removed from comprehension that one wonders if it is of any consequence at all. It is to be understood, though, that this does not mean that *abhinaya* in the Rasa is slight or shallow but that it has been raised to a lofty height where it becomes not a mundane but a transcendental experience—where it is not so much the body but the soul that counts. The dancers in Rasa are charged with intense devotional fervour, and their homage through the dance is intended to be as pure and tender as the petals they offer at the lotus feet of their beloved Radha and Krishna.

A third variety of Manipuri *nartana* in the classical mould is the Sankeertan. This stems from the cult of Gaudiya Vaishnavism, expounding the teachings of Chaitanya, that came to Manipur from Bengal. Sankeertan means community prayer, and in Manipur this is done not simply through



Manipuri



◀ Krishna and Radha are the principal characters in Rasa Lila

Lai Haraoba, the pre-Vaishnava ritual dance of Manipur, in which men and women, young and old, take part alike



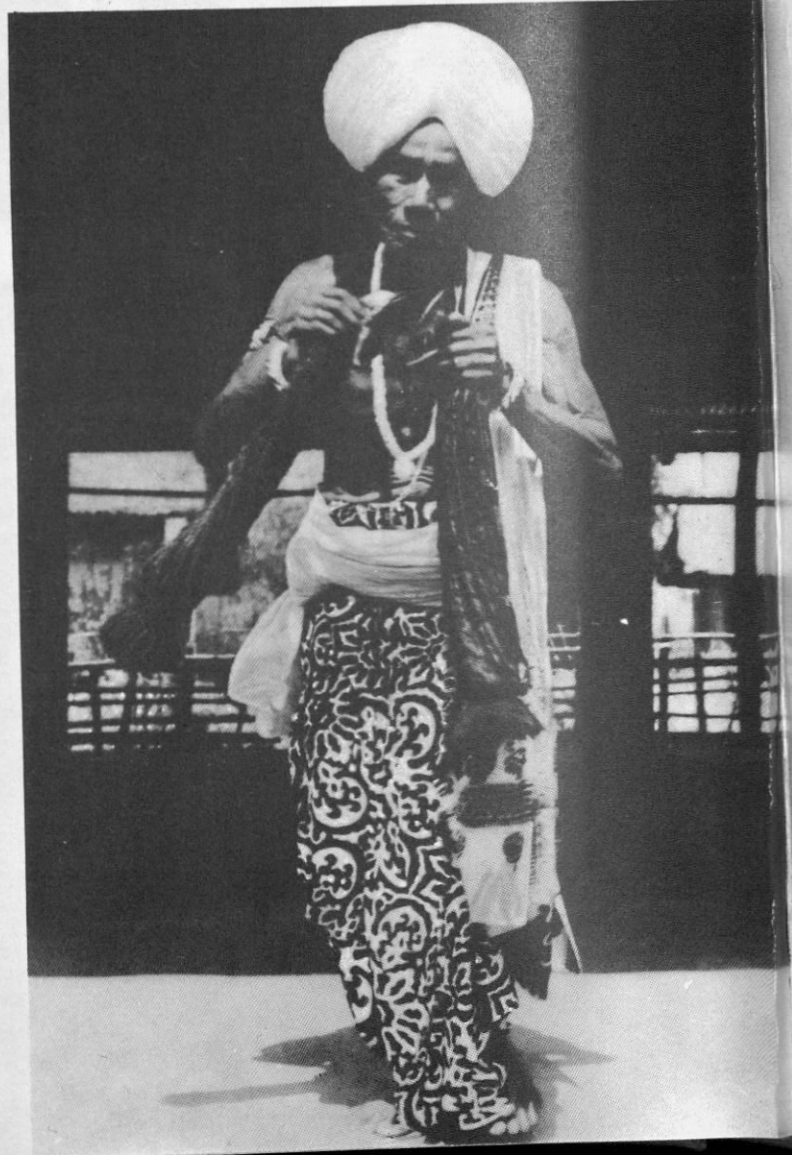
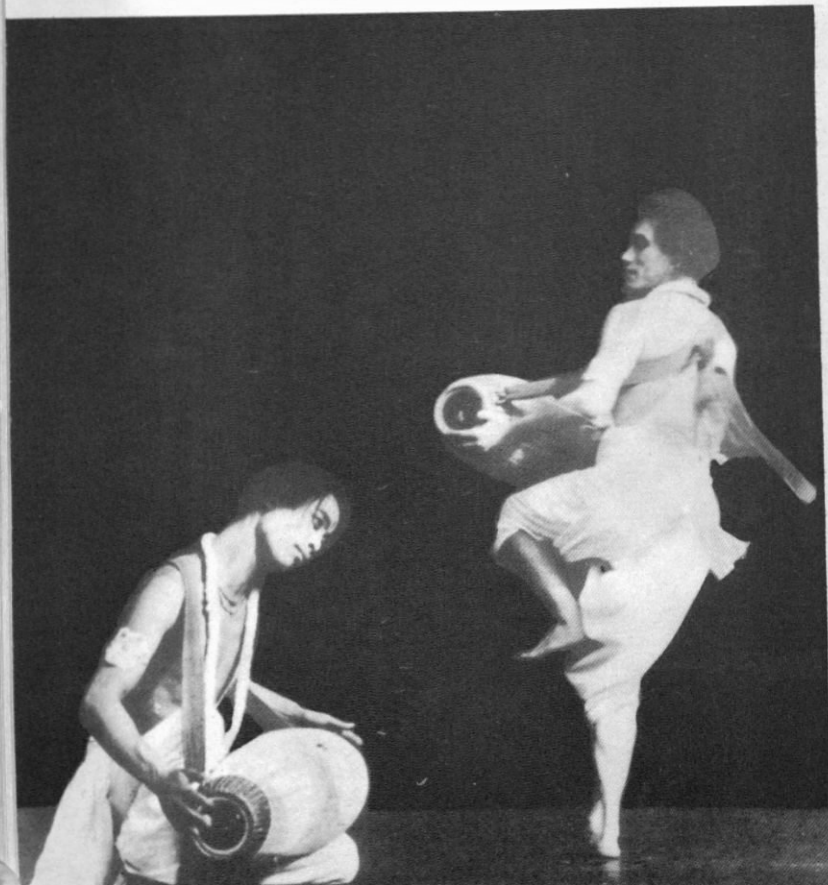
Manipuri

◀ Khamba Thoibi is a dance named after the celebrated lovers of that name and is performed generally as a part of Lai Haraoba

Kartal Cholom, a variety of Sankeertan, is danced with cymbals in the hands ▼



In Poong Cholom, the dancer and drummer become one ▼



singing or chanting but also through dancing, coupled with the playing of drums or cymbals. The Manipuri Sankeertan is performed on occasions of religious significance, weddings, the birth of a son, the death of an elder or for ancestor-worship. It is also invariably introduced to preface a Rasa presentation. It has no place, however, in the Lai Haraoba or even in the celebration of the Holi festival, the main feature of which is dancing.

A Sankeertan performance is always an extremely dignified and sober affair. The singing, the dancing and the playing of the drum or cymbals, everything has its own fully developed technique which is governed by strict rules and norms. Like the Lai Haraoba and the Rasa, the Sankeertan is also a dance that is an expression of the overpowering religious ardour of the people.

The Manipuri Sankeertan finds its expression through two principal dances, known as Choloms. These are the Poong Cholom, performed with a drum, and the Kartal Cholom, danced with cymbals. The first takes its name after the *poong*, an elongated earthen drum that is suspended horizontally from the dancer's neck. In Poong Cholom the dancer and the drummer become one. The dancer himself plays the drum all along as he dances. The passages of rhythm rolled out can be brief and simple or fairly long and complicated. Not that the dancer reproduces verbatim with the feet what all he generates with his hands and fingers: he allows the pulse in play to permeate his whole being and then to find its release through a step, a dip, a ripple, a shrug, or any bodily action. In moments of overwrought exuberance, the dancer may take bounding leaps or spins in the air, but not for a moment does he lose his hold over the playing of the drum. The Poong Cholom can be performed by a single dancer or by as many as a 100 dancers together. The dress comprises a *dhoti*, a fluffy turban, and a sash across the front, all clean white. The *poong* itself is wrapped around with a white cloth of a gauzy texture.

In Kartal Cholom, the dancers hold metal cymbals which are generally provided with trailing red tassels. The dance is performed mostly with the body straight or with the knees flexed and with gentle steps, both forwards and backwards, which are sometimes suggestive of the gait of certain animals and birds. Along with the dance, the cymbals are wielded and played gracefully. The rhythm is generally reinforced by accompanying the performance with a drum, and sometimes there is singing too, the songs being of devotional poets like Jayadeva and Vidyapati and rendered in *ragas*. The dance is not so forceful or varied as in Poong Cholom. The dress is the same as in Poong Cholom except for the *dhoti*, which is not white but carries a printed ornamental motif.

Poong Cholom and Kartal Cholom are danced by men only. Though indeed thrilling to watch, the dances are presented not as entertainment but as a sacred offering. Which explains why, at times, the dancers are able to work themselves up to such a pitch of divine rapture that they lapse into a trance. And one can well imagine the reaction of the onlookers, drawn as they are from a people who even normally go about spiritually inebriated, to a situation such as this.





A Kathakali demon

FAUBION BOWERS

The Dance in India

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Manipuri

SO-CALLED MANIPURI DANCING Poet Rabindranath Tagore first journeyed to Manipur as early as 1917 and felt that there he had at last found the solution to the tragedy of India's dying dance. Here was a country where the arts had remained fully alive and active. Tagore hoped that by transplanting the dance from Manipur to India proper he would have the secret of regenerating dance throughout all India. This grandiose ambition almost came to fruition. Certainly Manipuri dancing has deeply affected dance's widest fields—movies, city dancers, and international artists' exhibitions abroad.

Shortly after his visit, Tagore installed a dance teacher from Manipur at Shantiniketan, an all-India school of arts in Bengal. Apparently Tagore was too definite about the use he wished to make of Manipuri dancing and too opinionated as to what he thought the art of dance should be in general. He selected bits and pieces of the teacher's instruction and molded them to fit his own romantic dance-dramas. By simplifying the dance he made it possible for his students to be dancers and brought the art well within their reach. What became known as "Manipuri Dancing" was actually this Tagorean simplification and its latitude of interpretation. During the arid period of India's recent dance history, this Manipuri-cum-Tagore style swept the country. People responded to its soft, flowing, unintellectual, and restful style. Mathematics and perfectionism in classical dancing had until then precluded the entry of amateurs into the dance field. Tagore's Manipuri dancing filled a vacuum and answered the cry of amateurs.

Morality also played a part in the easy acceptance of this style of dancing. The stigma on India's classical dances was still heavy; Manipuri dancing was completely new and unknown.

There were no preconceived prejudices against it, although had people understood many of the movements or known the inner nature of Manipuri dancing, they certainly would have developed a reaction against its eroticisms. Sarojini Naidu, that grand old lady of Indian politics, made dance history when, after the performance of Amubhi Singh, one of the first Manipuris to perform outside Manipur, she publicly exclaimed, "Here is a dance with no crude form of movement; a mother may see it with her son." The amateur was now, with her blessing, safe from attack on moral grounds.

Sinuuous curves, flowing turns, hoop-skirt costumes, and snaky arm wriggles which passed as Manipuri dancing invaded the movies and almost dislodged Kathak from its senior position there. Year after year Tagore's school turned out graduates. Even some international artists, whose standard ought to have been higher, continued the perpetration of this charming deceit. In that period of drowning, perhaps India's art had to clutch at any straw.

All India became aware of Manipuri dancing. No artist or critic dared ignore it. Some dancers even specialize in its style to the exclusion of all else. The fact is, oddly enough, that the style of dancing has no historical basis. It has only the most tenuous connection with Manipuri dancing itself, and in Manipur, when films of Indian dancing are supposed to represent Manipuri dancing, the audience rather cruelly roars with laughter.

The myth is perpetuated for two reasons. No dancer of India has ever taken the trouble to study in Manipur. Secondly, the few Manipuris who have come to India as drummers or teachers are in so precarious a financial position that they are at the mercy of their students. They themselves call the dancing they teach "Oriental"; but the public continues to regard it as "Manipuri."

Were the dance of Manipur inferior to its paste diamond which sells so well, such a state of affairs would be justifiable. It is, however, in every way superior to its humbug. The dance which inspired Tagore to bring Manipur into the open world,

MANIPURI



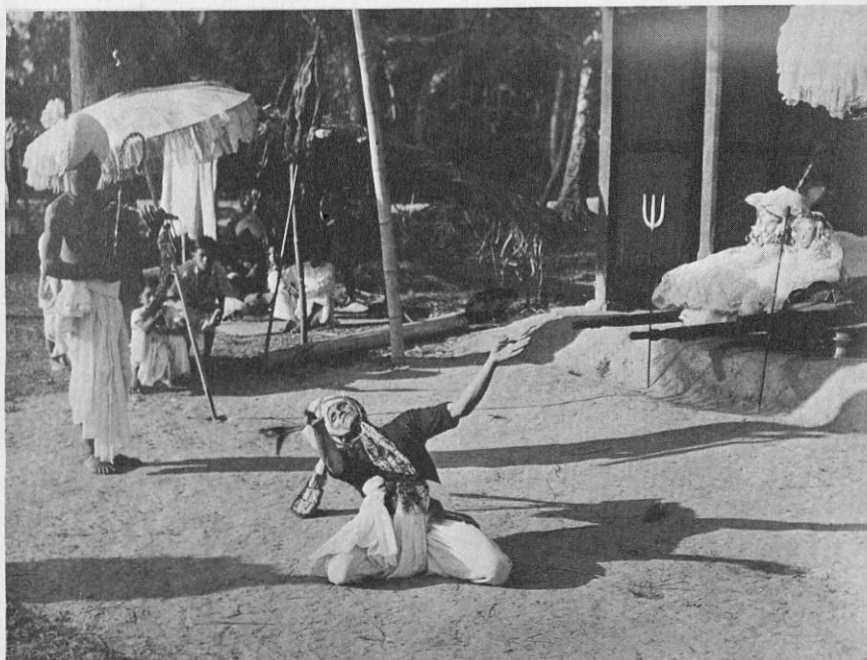
An aged village woman dancing in the Lai Haraoba



Maiba and maibis dancing preliminary invocations in the Lai Haraoba



Women dancing the Lai Haraoba



An interlude of the Lai Haraoba danced before the gods of the Umeng Lai

MANIPURI



Young children dancing the Lai Haraoba



Maibi dancing the "infusion of life"

the dance whose imitation is mimicked the length and breadth of India and even abroad, remains locked within its lush and fertile valley.

COUNTRY OF MANIPUR Manipur still remains today an undiscovered tourist's paradise. In 1881 when the British finally conquered it, the last part of India to succumb fully, there was a bloody massacre of the political agent and his party. Since then Manipur has been regarded as a restricted area, and specific authorization has been required before entry is permitted. In postindependence times, because of the Communist threat from Burma and the strategic importance of Manipur (as the Japanese showed in 1944 by pushing into India as far as Imphal, Manipur's capital town), the pass system and policy of general exclusion have continued. The Indian government is now lenient in granting temporary entry-permits, but tourist facilities are few. Manipur as yet remains unspoiled and untouched by the outside world.

Manipur's isolation is geographical as well as political and military. Situated at India's most northeastern frontier, it is surrounded by nine converging mountain ranges. Its highest peak, the sacred mountain of Kobra, is the lowest point of the Himalayan range. Manipur is an oval-shaped valley of 700 square miles, but including the mountain ranges surrounding the valley, the total area exceeds 7,000 square miles.

Before the war Manipur was virtually inaccessible. Today it can be reached in two ways: by the infrequent planes which take three hours direct from Calcutta; and by circuitous train which takes three days and involves a long list of difficulties including train changes, crossing rivers by ferry, and finally transferring to motor bus to reach the heart of the valley, Imphal.

Scenically, Manipur is extraordinarily beautiful. Suddenly the mountains disentangle themselves, and at their feet is spread a flat and smooth plain. Intensive cultivation of paddy makes the landscape look like irregular gingham checks on a bolt of cloth. From the valley one seems to be surrounded by

layer after layer of increasingly high hills, each of which becomes more cleverly dovetailed into the other. Huge wisps of clouds lie between the ranges, as if loath to quit the valley. There is always the contrast between the earthy brown near hills and the shaded blues of the far hills. Everywhere there are winding streams; everywhere there are patches of jungle. The blue dome of the sky stretches tightly overhead and appears to hold the earth together by its encircling embrace. The heat is not tropically enervating. Except at night, there is no bitter chill to restrict man's free and comfortable action. Even during the brief months of the rains, the wind is zephyrous and soft. In Manipur the sun is the only warmer of man, and the altitude gives the bracing cool which keeps man fresh.

Manipur's inaccessibility allowed few outsiders to reach the valley, but once there, they remained and were absorbed into the people. The result is that racially, the Manipuri is a deeply mixed ethnic group. West has mixed with East and North with South. Chinese have blended with Aryans, Mongolians with Dravidians. This mixture creates the "pure" Manipuri, called Meithi, who live in the valley and number 400,000 of the total population of 600,000. The balance constitutes the racially purer but artistically inferior hill tribes who live in the mountains and who are greatly looked down upon by the highly civilized Meithis. Amid headhunters, aborigines, and predatory and warring neighbors, Manipur is an oasis of civilization.

The mixture of bloods has made the Manipuri both beautiful and healthy. As a nation, there is no monotony of homogeneity. Some are fair; some are dark, some more predominantly Indian; others more Burmese. In general they are all physically well built, small, sturdy, smooth skinned, small nosed, and their eyes have a slight Mongolian fold.

There are remnants of each of the civilizations which form part of the mixture. But the predominant religion is Vaishnavite Hinduism, forming an inescapable link between Manipur and India. Manipur's arts are religious, and what little is known of their history is greatly colored by religious myth and legend.

Economically Manipur is completely self-sufficient. There is an abundance of food, materials for weaving clothing, forests of timber, and wildlife. No necessity of life is lacking. In addition, there are luxuries. Indigo and tea grow wild. Silkworms thrive. Flora and fauna of the rarest sort are plentiful. Orchids are common and are not even cultivated or sold because of their profusion. Most of all, there is a wide variety of the elements of civilization to make life graceful and beautiful. There is music and dancing of a standard rivaling even those countries where art is made a profession of the few.

Manipur is a land of dancers. It is a truism that 99 percent of the women weave, and anyone who weaves is also well trained enough to dance. Manipuri men are also dancers, simply because of the fact that they are, for the most part, idle. There is nothing for them to do since business and housework are largely the responsibility of the women. It is compulsory, however, for a woman to dance, and optional for men. Manipur is therefore a nation of amateurs. If you ask why a great dancer does not devote himself exclusively to the dance, the answer is likely to be, "There are so many dancers in Manipur, they are *all* unemployed."

HISTORY OF MANIPURI DANCING Mythology connects Manipur's origin with dancing. According to the Meithi people (whose holy scriptures or *puranas* are often not in agreement with orthodox Hinduism), Manipur was created so that gods might have a place to dance. The story of Manipur's creation is that Krishna and the Gopis (milkmaids who always accompany him) had created a dance of ecstasy in heaven, the Ras Lila, with which they amused themselves in secret. Siva (in Manipur, a lesser god than Krishna) asked to see this enchanting Ras Lila. Krishna declined in part, but allowed Siva to stand porter at the gate providing he, on oath, kept his back to the Ras Lila and did not peek at the dance itself. Siva kept his promise. Afterwards he became intoxicated with the memory of the ravishing music, the clank of the bells around the feet, and the whirl of the turning skirts. He could think of

nothing else. Parvati, Siva's wife, grew irritated by his constant preoccupation. Together they decided to recreate a Ras Lila of their own. The problem was where to perform it.

They walked down the Himalayas until they reached Manipur. Siva stood on Mount Kobru and saw that the valley was submerged in water. He took his sacred trident to make a gash in the side of a mountain, and the waters immediately drained into the Irrawaddy River of Burma where they still flow. Siva and his consort were elated at the sight of the prospective land for the much desired Ras Lila. They summoned nine celestial nymphs (*Apsaras*) and each stood on the nine ranges of hills surrounding the valley. The musical instruments of Manipur were created, the *pung* drum (something like the mridanga of Bharata Natya) and the *pena* (a small stringed instrument a little like a violin). Dressed in the Manipuri Ras Lila costume, the group danced their imitation of the heavenly dance. The serpent god, Pakhanba, who dwells at the core of the world, kept the area lit with the radiance of his jeweled, cobra-like hood. At the conclusion of the dance, the serpent was in such ecstasy that the glitter of his jewels was released in a spray over the entire area. And so it is that the place was called *mani* (diamond) *pur* (place), and thus it is, that the Ras Lila costumes of Manipuri dancers are sprinkled with shiny mica to sparkle like the original diamonds.

LAI HARAObA Legend claims that this imitation Ras Lila, for which Siva and Parvati created Manipur, is the Lai Haraoba dance, still performed annually. Research shows, however, that the legend connecting the two is far more recent in history than the actual dance. With the coming of the Hindus into Manipuri and their Aryan mythology, the story was added onto the already existing dance. Lai Haraoba, as can be seen from its content, is obviously connected with animistic and pre-Hindu gods of the Meithi people.

Lai Haraoba, which means literally "to please the gods," is the grand-scale dance of Manipur performed by each vil-

lage for a month as a yearly religious obligation. Without it, the gods become displeased, and no one in Manipur is willing to risk the disruption of his happy life. Identical performances are repeated each day throughout the month. Nowadays, the duration of the dance is sometimes shortened to eight or ten days because of lack of funds or the pressure of other village work. Each day it starts about three or four in the afternoon and must end before sundown.

Normally Lai Haraobas take place during the months of April and May, shortly before the season's work of planting begins. For reasons of convenience they are also arranged, as the village likes, any time during the year. They may also be decreed astrologically by the Maharaja, who is more the spiritual than the secular head of the state. A prince of the blood is never allowed to witness a Lai Haraoba, since during it, the gods become so pleased that any wish is bound to come true. A prince might wish for the throne, as Manipur's history so often proved in the past.

Lai Haraoba is dedicated primarily to the *umeng lai*, a sort of village god or local deity. Altogether there are 361 *umeng lai* in Manipur and among them are kings and spirits, as well as gods. The cult of *umeng lai* is a combination of spirit, god, and hero worship.

Ordinarily the *umeng lai* is a mound of earth, often no more than a white ant hill. Whenever mounds are found near a village, the people construct a light shelter of bamboo and thatched roofing over them. Before it they place a small wicker tray of several layers (like a lazy susan) to be used as a receptacle for offerings. Invariably, there will be a flat, grassy area nearby which serves as a dancing arena. The power of the *umeng lais* is reputed to be very great. A villager's oath invoking them is still recognized as binding in the courts of law.

Some *umeng lais* are small huts which house bronze masks of Nongpok Ningthou (King of the East) and his wife Panthoibi, later identified in Manipur theology as Siva and Parvati. Others house the spirits of Manipur kings. These are rem-

nants of the once widespread *deva-rajā* (king as god) cult, an Indian counterpart of the concept of the "divine right" of kings.

It seems clear that umeng lais were originally primeval spirits of the forest who were worshiped animistically, before the advanced and highly organized Hindu religion came to Manipur. When the Aryans arrived with their religion, either passing through to further parts of Greater India and Asia, or simply expanding to escape economic difficulties or religious pressures at home, they brought the oldest form of Hinduism, Shaivism, the worship of Siva through the phallic form of the lingam. It was easy to identify the shape of the Siva lingam with the mounds of the umeng lais already considered holy and potent. Umeng lais today are the chief vestige of the pre-Hindu, local religion, and the most important remnant of ancient Shaivite Hinduism, which by the seventeenth century in Manipur had completely acceded to Vaishnavism and the cult of Vishnu. Through them a fragment of unrecorded history has been perpetuated.

Around the umeng lais are a high priest (*maiba*) and high priestesses (*maibi*). They function as witch doctors, and are connected with trances, exorcism, fortunetelling, Siva, and Lai Haraobas. Maibi are more numerous in the profession than men. They are women who have at one time, usually in their youth, become possessed. The symptoms of possession in a woman are that her hair curls inexplicably and she begins to act strangely. In such an event it is obvious to the Manipuri that the spirit of an umeng lai has entered her body. She is taken to the head maiba who ascertains the validity of the possession. She then becomes a novice and is taught the art of being a maibi. Her training embraces the learning and practice of sacerdotal dances, a strange language which is close to gibberish, and the rite of tossing gold and silver which is the special province of maibis and the beginning act of Lai Haraobas. The course for learning the maibi's trade lasts from six to eight months. This undue length of time (what they learn is reasonably simple) is because maibi novices are

still under possession and recalcitrant to instruction. Afterwards they resume their normal life, return to their homes and husbands (if they are married); but the center of their life and their means of livelihood have shifted to predicting the future, officiating at ceremonies, and acting as choreographer-leader of Lai Haraobas.

Maibas and maibis are organizers, directors, and star performers in a Lai Haraoba. If a village is wealthy or important enough, it invites them from the maharaja's palace itself at Imphal. The maharaja, as spiritual head of the state, maintains a number of the most expert maibis in the country. As their powers of divination dwindle with age, the number maintained at the palace constantly fluctuates, and new maibis are introduced to the maharaja's pool of prophetic seeresses.

The broad outline of a Lai Haraoba is unalterable and follows a traditional pattern. It is part ritual, part dance, part a religious service, and part village entertainment. Interpretations of a Lai Haraoba vary, and much of the real meaning is obfuscated by neglect, by the overlay of subsequent religions, and through willful and predisposed attitudes of scholars and pundits.

In general, Lai Haraoba may be regarded as a small-scale reenactment of the creation of the world. Its essence interprets to men the divine and secret ways of how the creation of the world was effected and has come down, so the Manipuris say, in perpetuity to be annually demonstrated to keep fresh in men's minds the philosophy of the ways of God in forming the human world.

The cast of performers is the maiba who dances and also acts as chief musician, two maibis who dance and conduct the performance of the villagers, the maiba's assistants, all the available women and children of the village, and a selected group of men and youths of the village. Outsiders to the village may not participate.

Aside from the drums, the only musical instrument is the *pena khomba* played by the maiba and his assistants. A *pena khomba* is a small, single-stringed instrument consisting of a

short, thin rod with a resonator bulb at the end. It is held and played something like a violin. The bow resembles an archer's bow but has a bulblike curve at the top. Bells are attached to the bow and they serve as a percussion accompaniment to the string's melody. These bells substitute for ankle bells on the dancer's feet. Manipuri dancers' feet silently strike the soft lawn or plaster floor of the dance arena. The use of ankle bells would destroy the delicate sound of the pena. The pena has a curious, haunting, dulcet tone which sounds something like a cross between a string and a wind instrument. There is no rasp of the bow across the string, nor is there the stridency of breath produced through a tube. The pena is an ancient and traditional Manipuri instrument, but has, except when used as accompaniment to the Lai Haraobas, disappeared from the musical life of the people. A Lai Haraoba must always be performed with this instrument. In the finale other instruments are occasionally used, and in more urbane areas of Manipur sometimes a raucous Western-style four-piece band is hired for its greater volume.

PRELIMINARIES Bronze masks of the deities to be pleased by the Lai Haraoba are swathed in cloth to give them the semblance of a bodily form, and are placed in a wooden cart before the Umeng Lai. The maiba and maibi dressed in tight-fitting, white, nurselike uniforms prepare to invoke the spirits of the deities. Water is drawn in two copper pots from a nearby river or lake. The maibi tosses a piece of gold and a piece of silver toward the pots. Two threads are then tied to connect the two copper pots. The silver represents heaven, gold the earth. The round pots show that the earth is round and that in the beginning all was water. The two threads imply that like a spider who spins his web, God created the earth.

To invoke the spirits and instill power into the masks, the maibi then dance the Jibanyas (infusing of life). It begins with an obeisance to the gods. The dancer joins her palms together, raises them high over the right shoulder and brings them down toward her knees, and repeats the movement from the left

shoulder. Throughout the dance, she claps her hands, stomps her feet, and emphasizes a "spinning" gesture of curling the fingers (starting with the fifth finger) of the outstretched hand as the wrist turns in toward the body, as if invoking the spirits by luring them out of the air.

The second part of the maibi's dance is Nongdong (rain-place or sky). During an elaborate sequence of gestures, she claps her hands and employs invocatory gestures as if pulling rain down from the sky to encourage the watering of the earth's soil.

The third part of the maibi's dance is Leitai (earth-connection) which symbolizes the appeasement of earth, peace, prosperity, and the flourishing of esculents. The principle movement of Leitai is the bending over and clapping the hands near the feet and rapidly spinning around in this bent position in centripetal and centrifugal turns. Nongdong and Leitai are inseparable units of a single dance of heaven and earth. The dancer's hands represent heaven and her feet the earth, and Nongdong-Leitai combined represents the harmony between the two elements, combined by the magic of the maibi to produce all creation.

During these preliminaries the maiba dances around the maibis while continuing to play the pena. The spirit has now entered the idols and the maibi hands the invisible essence to the men serving as pot bearers. The maibis enter the sanctum of the umeng lai and begin to change their costumes.

JAGOI THOPA (COMING OUT OF THE DANCERS) The leading male villager is dressed in the costume of an ancient warrior, with a colorful turban decorated with peacock feathers and a red and gold *dhoti* or loin cloth tied so that a triangular flap hangs down the back. He represents the body guard for the spirits of the god while they are on earth. After the preliminaries he begins to beat a large drum in the center of the arena to announce that the Lai Haraoba has begun in earnest.

Various groups of village girls and women, whose ages range from about six to sixty, begin to dance directly in front of the

umeng lai. They are all dressed in the national costume of a purple wrapper (*panek*) which extends from the breasts to below the knees and which is patterned in the snake-coil design which winds around the body. Married women cover their heads with transparent gossamer cloths which fall lightly over their bare shoulders. As they dance they sing simple songs to the effect that they are worshipping the gods. The lyric passages of these songs are replete with sexual symbolism of mountains contrasted with valleys, bees and birds in contact with flowers, and arrows piercing the flesh. They dance in groups numbering from two to twenty at a time. One group fades into the next, and by the time one set of dancers has finished its concluding obeisance, the succeeding one is already in full swing dancing before the shrine.

Each section of the dance ends with the *kurumba* or salutation. This is one of the most important and frequent gestures in Manipuri dance. It is formed by each hand describing alternate figure 8's. The wrists are kept close together as the hands pivot around them. At the beginning of the movement, the wrists are together; the middle of the movement, the wrists are back to back. The effect is like an open lotus being rapidly shaken to form an 8 in the air. The gesture is basically a dance stylization of the Indian *namaskar* greeting of the joined palms. In daily life, however, Manipuris do not use the *namaskar*; they bow in the Japanese manner.

While the women continue dancing, a group of men at the opposite end of the dance arena begin to shout "hoi, hoi," which gives this section the name of Hoi Lauba (shouting of hoi). The men then form a circle around the drummer. They shout in old Manipuri the key phrase and central line of the Lai Haraoba, "Harilo lila harilo lerilo, haiyute khulaite hoyahе asibu thoina haraoba hoi he hoi he haya nageda." This ancient phrase was supposed to have been shouted by the original gods during their dance of creation of Manipur. It means roughly, "Hail to Hari (god): Can there be a greater pleasure and jubilation than this?" In answer shouts of "no, no" (*leitai*,

leitai) are given. In recent times, in deference to the celestial Ras Lila of which the Lai Haraoba is supposed to be only an imitation, or out of preference for the later Ras Lila which was subsequently introduced to Manipur, some performers shout "yes, yes." The shouting of "yes" appeared only after the Vaishnavism cult in the eighteenth century and is not traditionally correct.

The men begin to sing in a high, vibrant, falsetto characteristic of all Manipuri folk music. The maiba and maibis reappear, now having changed their clothes. The maiba wears a green velvet jacket, white turban, and a skirt of purple and white, the maharaja's colors. These colors represent the maharaja's spiritual right to secular powers, and the spiritual powers of the maiba entitle him to represent the maharaja at religious functions of which the Lai Haraoba is one. Each maibi wears over a white uniform a gaily colored green, gold, and red bordered cloth which is wrapped like a sash around the waist. Maibis also have ornaments and jewelry, and wear leaves in the pierced lobes of their ears.

The trio of maiba and maibis begin to dance before the shrine. The circle of men continues singing. Their songs may be old and traditional or may be improvised by the lead singer on the spur of the moment. The themes are generally the same. One example is: "A mother asks her daughter, 'Who is that boy?' The daughter answers, 'That is only the cat.' The mother's rejoinder is, 'Can a cat wear a shirt? Can a cat smoke? I'll tell your father on you.' The daughter answers, 'He's your son-in-law, mother dear!'" The implication is that the mother was tricked into having this particular son-in-law through an illicit affair. The songs of the men begin to grow more and more lewd.

A huge circle of women begins to form around the entire dance arena. Each has now tied a wide yellow sash around her waist and over the panek. The yellow, symbolic of spring when the yellow mustard flower blooms, represents the women as mother earth ready to yield from their wombs.

LAIBOU SHABA (JOKING WITH THE GODS) In the center of the dance arena is a small circle cleared of grass and spread over with a hard cement made of inactive cow dung and water. In the center of this is a small earthen mound, into which has been set a *tulsi* (balsam) plant. The maibis now place some offerings of food and flowers on a circular plantain leaf tray before this mound, symbolic of God floating on the water before the creation of the world. The maibis pick out of the offering two sprigs of *langtrei*, a green plant smelling faintly of new mown hay, and place them between the third and fourth fingers of each hand so that they hang loosely at the back of the hand. A procession is formed with the maiba (and additional pena players) and the maibis at the head, followed by the women. In the center the circle of men around the drummer increases in size. Immediately behind the maibis is a group of six to twelve persons carrying umbrellas, water pots, fans, and yak tails which look like feather dusters. Two men whose arms and shoulders are tightly wrapped around with a white sheet are presumed to be holding the invisible and formless spirits which the maibis have invoked and handed to them.

The procession begins its movement, called *paring tangsang hunba* (laying of the outline), which symbolically fixes the outline of the universe. The maibis stand at the extreme right, the followers are ranged to the left. They begin to dance in a counterclockwise movement within the circle. At the same time each dancer, led by the maibis, revolves by herself. This represents the earth moving from west to east on its axis around the sun which moves from east to west. As the procession dances around the circle, the maibis make representations of the male and female organs with their hands. As they show these to various spectators, there are shrieks of good-natured laughter. The maibis at intervals shout, "*Hoirou heiya*" (let us shout hoi). They are re-enacting the joyful work of the creation of the world.

A special movement of Laibou Shaba, the Lairen Mathek (literally, god-serpent-zigzag) then begins. It refers to the

serpent god, Pakhanba, who holds the world together. While dancing, the procession begins to walk sidewise, weaving back and forth and progressing forward very slowly. The zigzag consists of three steps on a diagonal to one side, three steps to the other side and then around. The peculiar step of the Lairen Mathek symbolizes the consolidation of the formation of the earth.

The succeeding portion of the dance is a continuation of the procession. Under the guise of giving form to the spirit of the gods, the creation of man himself is enacted. The maibis name the various parts of the body, point to them, and the procession repeats their words and gestures. They form the chin, the shoulders, hands, nails, chest, breasts, stomach, and devote the greater part of the creation of the body to the sex organs. The men chorus, "If there are sexual organs, then there is copulation." The maibis shout, "The silk cotton trees are flowering and the cats are copulating." The rhythmic chant grows faster and faster as the performers improvise remarks which become progressively more obscene. The men call out, "The maibi has lost her vagina" (which refers to spiritual chastity, since maibis do not marry if they are possessed at an early age). Another group calls out, "Your mother is copulating." The men again, "Now even the maibi is copulating." They point to some spectators and cry, "Look at what great testicles they have." Then three men run to the women's circle and exclaim, "Lift up your legs to be attacked." The maibis chant, "Look at the pena, it is one long penis with one large testicle." The drummer rushes toward some tiny children and says, "Even the underage girls are copulating." This "joking with the gods" comes to a conclusion at the maibi's discretion, usually after the procession has danced five or six times around the arena.

The actual words for this section vary in details in each Lai Haraoba. The principle of obscenity is, however, common to them all. The translation "copulation" is euphemistic, since in a Lai Haraoba, the entire range of vulgar synonyms is employed. The polite word in Manipuri, which would cor-

respond to "copulation" in English, is "lai thou" and means literally "to do a god." Such ambiguous and restrained phrases are rarely used in a Lai Haraoba.

Originally the purpose of this section of the Lai Haraoba was to induce fertility. Manipur has suffered throughout its history from wars, particularly from the depredating Burmese, who have sacked and looted almost as many capitals as the Manipuris have built. Illegitimacy therefore has never been recognized in Manipur, because every child, regardless of the circumstances of his birth, was considered a child of the state and useful eventually to serve as a warrior or to increase the population by producing other children. Even Manipur's extreme religious orthodoxy was of a most tolerant nature, permitting widows to remarry and embracing Muslims and foreigners provided they merge with the population. The Lai Haraoba had a political function and useful purpose in stimulating a higher birth rate for the nation's protection.

Lai Haraoba must be considered as a fertility rite in dance. It impinges on the emotions as an adulation of the body and quasi-ecstatic exaltation of the sexual urges. In its actual practice today in Manipur, it probably serves as a release from the rigid moral restrictions which normally accompany village life and emanate from the narrow restraints imposed by small communities living closely together and each watching the activities of the other members.

The complete abandon and seeming vulgarity of the Lai Haraoba appears to the foreigner, who has schools, books, movies, office work, and numerous other sublimations, as a rather shocking spectacle. But considering the fact that sex, religion, and dance are the only diversions from the routine labor of the average villager of Manipur, Lai Haraoba takes on the aspect of being a concentrated fusion of his three pleasures. Why should he not, the foreigner asks himself, openly glorify his entertainments? The fact that such frankness does not lead to license is apparent from the well-ordered and regulated community life which any Manipur village exemplifies.

BHANGI (GESTURE OR MOTION) This, the best section of the whole dance, immediately follows Laibou Shaba. The choreographic plan indicates that the gods, after their labor of creation, are taking an outing to survey the world. The coil of dancers continues weaving around in a circle. The dance movements, as the word *bhangi* suggests, become more intricate and graceful. The dance which the Maibis perform during the Bhangi is also called Langmei. Langmei is the large eagle of Manipur and many of the movements of this dance resemble its form and flight. The name was adopted to distinguish the Bhangi of the Lai Haraoba from other dances and movements of the same name. In Langmei the hands are serpentine and there is much alternation of the palms, i.e., if one palm is up, the other will be inverted. The forefinger of each hand curls at intervals and resembles a bird's beak. During the complex hand movements the dancer hops on the toes of one foot while turning slowly around in a circle. Langmei movements are slow and intense, and appear simple, but like so much of Manipuri dance, their appearance belies the complexity of their proper performance.

During Bhangi, the group of men sing songs of a suggestive nature. For example, "Oh woman, I want to tell you something under the peepul tree. If you agree, then you will have been intended to be my wife." Another more explicit example: "A dove is cooing. It is sweet. Cooing of copulation." While the maibis continue Langmei, movements of the chorus are reduced to simple hand routines repeating: two claps of the hands, then the hands are extended out palm down.

LAIROIBA (CONCLUSION) The central dance of the concluding section, called Sagetpa, is the most elaborate of the Lai Haraoba group dances. The spirits of the gods manifest themselves in the dancers as husband and wife, as man and woman, and the performers dance in pairs. This dance is variously known as "Love dance of Nongpok Ningthou and Panthoibi" and as "Dance of the Fisherman Khamba and the Princess

Thoibi." The latter two are the almost legendary lovers of the fifteenth century who succeeded in their love despite a difference of station in life and have been the subject of countless romances and ballads. Sagetpa is best seen at Moirang, an ancient capital some fifty miles from Imphal and the home of many of Manipur's fiercest warriors in the past.

The costume prescribed for men is a turban and a flowing, silk *dhoti*. Women add to their paneks the Manipuri bride's crown, a round circle covered with a thin strip of red velvet from which thin slivers of gold about one inch in length hang over the forehead. The crown fits lightly on the top of the head and the gold glitters as the dancer moves.

The maibi calls to the pairs of dancers, "Hoi, hoi, Servants of the King of Gods. Oh you servants of the Queen of Gods: Look who comes here. Look, hoi, look he has come. He is the effulgent light of the East. He is the embodiment of truth. He has come with a hockey stick over his shoulder." The dance begins with the representation of a girl seeing a stranger who stirs her heart. She becomes embarrassed and tries to run away. The dance takes one through an entire gamut of coquetry, love feelings, separation, fulfillment.

Together the lovers enact stylizations of various activities: harvesting paddy, dancing, weaving, spinning, and merry-making. All these are considered functions of the gods, and humans are only imitating when they perform them. One of the most charming interludes of the dance is the Pibul Jagoy which represents couples throwing a ball. They toss the invisible ball back and forth and as they hop along, they cry meaningless words of pleasure, "Tsui ha ha ha."

A boat-race dance follows. The concluding section should be, although it is sometimes omitted, Augri Hangel, a dance of victory which symbolizes the ways and means of good government. It is still used to celebrate martial successes and, it is said, that if danced on the soil of an enemy village, that village can never rise again.

The dancing ends, the ceremony of tossing the silver and gold is repeated and the spirits of the gods are returned to

heaven. The Lai Haraoba is concluded until the following year.

Lai Haraoba is the oldest form of dance in Manipur. Its origin is lost in antiquity. Its central importance lies in the fact that it is the basis of all Manipuri dancing. All subsequent dancing stems from it, and all movements can be traced to some section of it. The repertoire of the brilliant maibi dances and the varieties of the Sagetpa alone make it of inestimable value to the reservoir of movements and dance forms of India.

KIRTAN The religion of Manipur expresses itself in a synthesis of music, singing, dancing, and drama. Since Manipur is a deeply religious nation, the majority of its population is proficient in several of these arts. Dancing, widespread as it is, constitutes only one emotional outlet for the people. The dominant element of the Manipuri's religion and life is music, and it subtends all the rituals as well as the arts. Of music's many facets, kirtan singing occupies the highest position of honor. From it, Manipur's most advanced arts have developed.

Manipuri religion, apart from the vestigial elements of animism represented by the Lai Haraoba, belongs to the Chaitanya sect of Vaishnavite Hinduism. In 1700 it was officially decreed the state religion by King Garib Nawaz, and since then has been the most powerful single influence on Manipuri life. Chaitanya, the founder of the sect, was a fifteenth-century saint who devoted himself exclusively to the worship of Radha and Krishna through hymns of praise (*kirtan*) and enactments of scenes from their lives and sportings in the garden of Brindavan. Chaitanya himself was regarded as an incarnation of Krishna, and through this grace expounded a type of religious ecstasy in which the joys and sorrows of Radha and Krishna become personal emotions experienced within the heart of the devotee. At the kernel of this cult is the divine eroticism first promulgated in the immortal book of songs *Gita Govinda* by Jayadeva. Chaitanya, owing to Muslim interdiction of temple attendance or public theatricals, developed a technique of small group devotional singing. Men gathered together in private homes and sang and

played their instruments and danced until the proper religious transport was produced. Chaitanya's community singing and his tenets spread throughout India and resulted everywhere in a tremendous wave of artistic endeavor. The initial force of this creative activity has, even in Bengal, Chaitanya's birth-place, now virtually disappeared. But in Manipur, the cult remains consistently fresh, active, and vital. There, kirtans, although sung in Old Bengali, a foreign language to Manipuris, are still the heartbeat and pulse of the country's emotional and religious life.

Each night from every temple of Manipur (and their number is legion since every house has its own private temple and attached dance pavilion or *mandal*), sounds of devotional singing issue. This performance is called Shanda Arathi or offering of the sacred fire to Lord Krishna. Manipuris say the custom developed because each night as Krishna returned home from tending his cows, his mother, fearing that harm might have come to him, lit a fire in order to inspect his body and reassure herself of his safety. A more likely explanation, however, is that it is a carry-over of primitive fears that the setting sun might not rise again without propitiation and human inducements. Nightly singing is as important a part of the Manipuri's daily ritual as are his morning ablutions and affixing of the sandalwood-paste *tika* marks on his forehead.

Once every month at least, Manipuris must sing a full and formal kirtan. On festival days they devote the entire day to this singing. During the Holi festival in March, the best singer groups of the country assemble and perform in contests before the maharaja who honors the best kirtan group by performing on the drum himself to accompany them.

Kirtans are generally sung in the mandal dance pavilion by a group referred to as *Pala*. *Nipa Pala* refers to male kirtan groups; *Nyupi Pala* to the rarer kirtan groups composed exclusively of women. *Nipa Palas* consist of as many as fifty or sixty singers who sit in a large square around the earth floor of the dance arena. They wear identical costumes. Their turbans, made of several yards of thin white georgette, are wound

tightly to form two enormous knobs at the top which look like fluffs of clouds resting lightly on the singer's head. The back of the turban is high on the head and shaped to show an inverted V of jet black hair. In front the turbans hide the hair but are slanted backward to tilt off the face. These turbans add considerable height and grandeur to the imposing appearance of the Pala group. Drummers and singers must wear the turban on entering and leaving the pavilion. Singers remove the turbans while actually singing.

The group is bare chested except for garlands of flowers, a short necklace of balsam seeds around the neck, and the three-stranded sacred thread of Hinduism across their shoulders and waists. Sometimes a long white folded cloth is laid over one shoulder. Around the loins they wear white dhotis. Each singer holds in his hands a pair of large, red-tasseled, shiny brass bells, like cymbals, called *kartal* (*kar*-hand; *tal*-tala or beat). In the center of the square are two drummers, the leader of whom is supposed to represent the drummer of Chaitanya's own original kirtan singing group. Chaitanya himself is considered to be present in the spirit conducting each performance. The *kartal* and drums are the only accompaniment to the chorus of singers.

Kirtan is essentially a trance art, and the singers become possessed by their music. Manipuri singing itself has a unique flavor and quality which differentiates it from any other related art. In folk songs, in the kirtans and their derivatives, in the women's Raseshori Kirtan, and in the dramatic Ras Lila, the peculiar genius of Manipuri vocal methods is strikingly demonstrated. Their singing shows a curious meeting of West and East. While having aspects in common with India and Far Eastern countries, the vocal methods and techniques are actually far more closely connected with European operatic styles. In general the nasal wail associated with the Far East, the hoarseness of Indian singing, and the bellowing of Western opera, are minimized in Manipur, and the residue of the best of each style seems compounded in their singing.

The Manipuri voice is basically true and clear without being

too thin or unresonant. To this the Manipuri adds a peculiar vibrancy, often taking the form of rapid trills, not in half tones only, but in quarter tones and in wider intervals (the effect is sometimes akin to yodeling). The men use falsetto freely and the range of voice is normally over three octaves. Most of the songs are high pitched, and have tortuous melodic lines. The curves and twists of the tunes sung in perfect pitch and flawless unison by fifty voices are woven against the sometimes clanging, sometimes whirring and swishing accompaniment of the kartal cymbal-bells. Into this, an emotional element is injected. At climactic moments the singing is a capella and its staccato punctuations pierce the hush of the silent drums and kartals. High tones are sustained for long periods and their tremolos heighten the tension. From time to time there are breaks of grief and choking gasps in the voices, when the ecstasy of the divine lovers Radha and Krishna is upon the singers. Joy and sorrow become one in the human voice. Sometimes the singing dissolves into an apparently uncontrolled and unpremeditated wail and moan. At times the singing is high, shrill, and almost screeching. This abandon is a trancelike ecstasy but it is controlled and governed by strict rules of Manipuri taste and aesthetic beauty.

Members of the audience respond excitedly. They weep, volubly, loudly, and articulately. At intervals, various auditors enter the square and prostrate themselves before the drummers and singers. They lie flat on the earth, wiping their eyes and mumbling their gratitude and humility over the ecstasy engendered by the kirtan. Few listeners remain impervious for long to this atmosphere of passionate response and reaction.

Throughout the singing, at intervals, pieces of homespun cloth are distributed to the artists. Without interrupting the performance, the cloth is thrown over the singers' shoulders or gently placed in their hands. This is a kind of part payment for their services. At exceptionally fine performances, a kirtan singer may "earn" as many as six or seven of these cloths at a single sitting.

During kirtan singing, as in all trances, there is the element of the unpredictable. As the singing grows more difficult, complicated, and enraptured in the course of its long hours, drummers and individual members of the chorus begin to rise and dance either separately or in pairs. Out of the kirtan two of Manipur's most interesting dances were produced, Pung Cholam and Kartal Cholam. Cholam means "brisk action" and refers to the body movements and dance of the drummer and the kartal singer during the kirtan.

PUNG CHOLAM In the Pung (drum) Dance, the double-barreled drum shaped like a mridanga is suspended by a cloth around the performer's neck and hangs at his waist. As he beats intricate cross rhythms (most Manipuri rhythms are in units of fives), he sways, pivots, and dances over the arena. He uses every trick of extracting sound from the drum: with the fingers, with the palm, with both hands beating one end, with the hands crisscrossed, by one hand creeping up on to the other end of the drum and joining the beat, by beating the sides of the wooden drum to produce clicks, and by various other devices. Toward the conclusion, the dance becomes violent and the tempo prestississimo. The dancer dips and spins around on one foot. At one point the dancer flicks his head sharply and sends his turban spinning off into the row of surrounding singers.

KARTAL CHOLAM The Kartal Dance like the Pung Dance is a virtuoso performance with a musical instrument. The dancers swing and play the kartals as they move. The number of different sounds they produce leads the auditor to forget that the kartals of a kirtan are tempered to produce only a single tone. The cups of the bells can be struck directly together, one can be rolled against the other in a sliding fashion, the edges may be hit together, or they may be either muted or allowed to resonate. The bells are beaten with tremendous crescendi which suddenly can subside into pianissimo. When beaten rapidly they create a whirring vibration which sounds

quite otherworldly. The vibrations are sometimes allowed to tremble through the air until they disappear into silence.

The dancers crouch, then rise to their full heights, leap and bound in such a way as to create the idea, as in the Pung Dance, that the entire body is dancing despite the limitation imposed by holding an object. The chief contrast in the choreography of the dance is between the angular sidesteps of the dancers' feet and the delicate swaying and rounded curves of the arms. As they wave the vibrating kartals, the air is showered with their after-tonal resonance. The trailing tassels weave sinuous abstract designs in space. The dance ends conventionally with the dropping of the bells, clapping three times, picking the bells up again, and then repeating the three claps with the bells.

Wherever kirtans are sung, at weddings, on festival days, at funerals, these two dances are performed, usually on the inspiration of the moment and without prior advice or arrangement.

RASESHORI KIRTAN Of women's kirtans or Nyupi Pala the best is the extraordinarily strange and beautiful Raseshori Kirtan. *Raseshori* is the Manipuri pronunciation of and word for Radha. This kirtan was created around 1750 by the great king of Manipur, Joy Singh (literally, Lion of Victory). After being defeated thirteen times in battle by the Burmese, Joy Singh finally appealed to the British East India Company for help. This step established peace for his country, the end of Burmese terrorism, and the beginning of the country's colonization. In the midst of numerous wars, he was nevertheless able to find time for art, and most of his musical compositions are still popular. In 1881 the British ended the Joy Singh line of kings in punishment for the assassination of the political agent and his party. Since then another family has held the throne. However, Joy Singh's descendants are still proudly in evidence today. The Raseshori Kirtan is their exclusive property and is sung on the thirteenth day after the death of a female of direct descent from Joy Singh. It is dirge music for

the commemoration of the dead, and may be sung only by women members of the blood. The present maharaja and his family are not allowed to attend.

There are about forty female descendants at present. For the Raseshori Kirtan they sit in the mandal square with two male drummers in the center. At one end of the square are two men each of whom holds two large conches. These shells, pitched to sound at intervals of a fourth apart, are blown to indicate the completion of a section and to emphasize the most important passages in the songs.

Toward the end of the Raseshori Kirtan, the conches blow and four of the senior princesses of the blood take their place in the center of the mandal arena. The youngest of them now is around sixty years of age. With their faces grim and tragic, they stand in a half circle, adjust the thin white veils covering their heads and shoulders, and begin to move their arms and fingers in soft, curving gestures.

Their dance is called Chali Shaba, perhaps the most important single group of movements in Manipuri dancing. *Chali* refers either to the four basic movements which form it, or to the four-four meter of the step; *shaba* means simply "to do." Chali is the only step of dancing which, it is claimed, no amateur or outsider has ever been able to approximate. Few among the Manipuris themselves can perform it perfectly. It is also used as a standard by which a dancer is judged. A Manipuri will say, "Her Chali is good," as the highest possible commendation.

Chali appears simple. Its four basic beats are as follows. Beat one: Hands extended, palms down, elbows at the side. The wrist rises twice. Beat two: Fingers, starting with the forefinger, curl separately over the thumb; the closed fist is then turned over with the fingernails up. Beat three: The forefinger of each hand is released with a flick and held pointing upwards. Beat four: This pointing pose is held. The remaining fingers are opened one by one and by the next beat one the hands are turned over palms down ready to recommence and repeat the same movement.

While repeating the Chali the princesses slowly progress in a semicircle around the center of the square. Their dance is calm, quiet, intense, and noble. Chali at a Raseshori Kirtan creates a deep mood, at once gracious and moving. The elegance of the dancing ladies, their age, their thwarted lineage, their grief that another of their line has passed away, and the exquisite music of the special kirtan songs combine to affect each spectator powerfully. Their dance is a show of restrained grief. But aside from the mood of bereavement, sympathy, or condolence that one feels, the important thing is that one is witnessing an emotion made visible in dance without direct exposition. The dignity of the dance removes it from graphic or literal representation. Its inner intensity glows with its certain intention and communicates itself to the spectator.

RAS LILA Manipur's two most celebrated distinctions are polo and Ras Lila. Polo originated there, they say, and is played today throughout the civilized world. Manipur's Ras Lila, although never as yet performed outside Manipur, is nevertheless famous by hearsay and could not fail to be appreciated by all civilized people. There is no doubt that it is one of the most remarkable contributions which India has ever made to art. It is also true that Manipur is fairly inaccessible as a country, and even when one is there, the dance is not always easily available. Ras Lila is played according to season, and usually on mountain sides or in far-off temples. To add to the inconvenience, it begins well after midnight and lasts until the sunrise. Ras Lila is an act of piety or religious devotion, and as such can not be ordered and staged other than at specific times in specific places. Non-Manipuris must either stand for the performances or sit on the ground near the back of the mandal. Only Vaishnavite Hindus are allowed within the mandal during a Ras Lila, and once it has started, the area becomes sacred and even they are not permitted to move closer to the performers. Only recently has the non-absorbed Muslim population of Imphal been allowed to witness the performances even from a distance.

Ras means in Sanskrit, emotion or feeling and by extension refers to the goodness or inner essence of all things. *Lila* means play or performance. The actual concept of Ras Lila conjures in the mind the idea of the ecstatic love dance and activities which Krishna indulged in with Radha and the Gopis at Brindavan garden thousands of years ago. Ras Lila is more than a love dance or love play; it is a form of religious ecstasy which recreates the divine joys of Radha and Krishna, and is presented before profane mortals to show them the spiritual bliss of paradise.

Manipuris for the most part are reluctant to speak about their Ras Lila. As a result, there are misinterpretations and misrepresentations abroad as to its real nature. Orthodox Manipuris regard it as a sacred, national treasure, and look to its heroine and hero, Radha and Krishna, as a personal husband or wife, intimate and private. The magic which unfailingly affects a spectator at a Ras Lila is believed by the Manipuri to be incommunicable to any but those of the faith. The religious impact of a Ras Lila may be a holy secret, but on aesthetic grounds, there is no question that it is an incredibly moving and exciting spectacle. It strikes at an emotional core which makes it entirely universal and deep in its appeal.

Ras Lila of Manipur is a comparatively recent creation. It was conceived by Joy Singh who first saw and heard it in a dream. He charged his gifted dancer daughter with the task of putting it into choreographic form. His bold attempt was to recreate on earth his dream vision of a celestial dance. The reverence with which Ras Lila is regarded today and the obvious near success of the attempt, are cited by many in Manipur as cogent arguments to prove the validity of Joy Singh's religious experience. The original Ras Lila, as Joy Singh planned it, was chiefly centered on the singing and dancing of Radha and the Gopis before the image of Krishna housed in the Govind (Krishna) temple at the palace at Imphal. Krishna was not represented in human form then, nor is he today at any performance commanded by a Maharaja. This is explained by the fact that Krishna's spirit is supposed

to reside at the Maharaja's temple and in his presence direct representation is superfluous.

In other Ras Lilas, Krishna is played by a male child between six and twelve years of age. Historically this is accurate, because at the time of his affairs with the Gopis, Krishna is reputed to have been only eleven. But the use of children to play the part of Krishna (and also Radha on occasions) has another purpose; their immaturity and innocence minimize the patent eroticism of the movements of the dance and texts of the arias. When Krishna is to be performed by an adult, the part is generally taken by a woman. No man past adolescence is allowed within the dance arena during the course of a Ras Lila, even as a performer. Radha, irrespective of the age of the person playing Krishna, may be either a child or an adult. The leading roles of the Gopis are always played by mature women. Although any group of Manipuris can work up a creditable performance of a Ras Lila with a little coaching and a few rehearsals, the key roles of most performances are taken by hired professionals. Ras Lila is actually a full-scale opera-drama, combining elements of dance, choruses, and religious cantatas. It lasts about seven hours, during which the performers are constantly acting, speaking, singing, and dancing. Because of its artistic demands, professionals are better qualified than amateurs.

TYPES OF RAS LILA Current today in Manipur are three kinds of Ras Lila: Basant (Spring) Ras, played during the full moon between March and April; Kunja (Arbor) Ras, played during Dasara, the harvest moon of November; Maha (Great) Ras, performed during the full moon in December. Various changes in the performances and stories differentiate the three Ras.

In Basant Ras the keynote is the essential "agreement" between Radha and Krishna. This agreement, however, comes only after the most painful separation between Krishna and Radha. Krishna has been unfaithful to Radha, and Radha in her jealous fury refuses to accept his advances when he re-

turns to her. Krishna in his plea to be reinstated to favor expresses one of the more controversial passages in Hindu literature, "*Dehi pada palabam udaram.*" The whole passage reads roughly in English as, "I fall prostrate at your feet. Without your love I cannot live. Take pity upon me. Place your feet which are as lovely as lotus petals upon my head." To conservative Hindus, Radha was a woman, and for their deity to prostrate himself and have a woman's feet placed on his head grated against their social pattern as they had construed it. Even the author, Jayadeva, from whom Joy Singh borrowed the passage, felt that he had erroneously heard his inner voice during the inspiration for the lines. He deferred writing them in his text, only to find later that, at least so the story goes, during his absence Lord Krishna had apparently manifested himself and inserted them. The passage nowadays is more or less accepted for its beauty and spiritual worth.

Kunja Ras represents the daily life and play of Radha and Krishna. There is no separation between the two. They are depicted amusing themselves in the arbor (*kunja*) of leaves and flowers made by the Gopis for Krishna to repose in with them.

Maha Ras depicts the separation of Radha and Krishna by his abandonment of her. Radha threatens to kill herself in the celebrated lyric aria known as Gopi Gita, and Krishna returns to her.

In addition to these, there are four subsidiary Ras Lilas. Nitya (everyday) Ras which may be performed at any season; Diba (daytime) Ras which may be performed in the daytime; Natna Ras, which has eight Gopis and one Krishna; and Osta Gopi Osta Chyam Ras, performed in April, and which has the large cast of eight Gopis and eight Krishnas. The texts of these vary only slightly one from the other.

For Maha Ras the dancers' hair is done in a pyramidal knot on the top of the head. For Kunja Ras the hair knot is at the side of the head. In Basant Ras and the other Ras Lilas the hair is worn in a knot at the back of the head.

Except for the Diba Ras, which is performed in ordinary

saris, the costumes for Radha and the Gopis are identical. This famous costume, which is erroneously thought abroad to be the national costume of Manipur, was originated by Joy Singh in his dream. It is both unique to Ras Lila and compulsory for its performances. The skirt is predominantly red satin with three colored stripes of varying widths around the bottom. On these are sewed bits of mirrors, gold appliqué, designs of triangles, and other patterns. Stiff cardboard keeps the skirt rounded for about two feet from the floor. It is said that this skirt was deliberately designed to hang away from the lower limbs in order to conceal their erotic movements. The swaying and gentle undulation of the skirt, set in motion by the movements of the dancer, never stops during a Ras Lila performance. Even when artists are not actually dancing they mark time by stepping back and forth in place. Since the skirt completely hides the leg movements, the dancers when walking appear to be gliding effortlessly across the arena.

At the waist over the top of the skirt is a wide flounce of shiny gauze. Stiffly starched, it falls into large waves and extends almost straight out over the cardboard-lined skirt. When the dancer rests by squatting down into the cardboard, this silver flounce rises to the chin, and the impression is like that of a puff fitting into an old-fashioned powder box. The short-sleeved blouse is of green or red velvet. Around her head the dancer wears a white, purple, green, or red veil studded with glittering mica and gold or silver stars. For the Maha Ras the veil hangs in front and covers the entire face as well as the back. In the hair various ornaments of gold and an abbreviated gold tiara are worn.

The Ras Lila costume is extremely decorative and expensive. It is kept by the maker who rents it out to the various performers. Only the maker knows the intricacies of washing and cleaning the costume properly. A costume usually lasts forty to fifty years since they are worn only once or twice a year. Some villages keep a complete wardrobe of these costumes as part of their village treasures.

Krishna's costume is predominantly blue, symbolic of his ap-

pellation, the "Blue God." This religious euphemism disguises the fact that Krishna's color of skin was actually dark. Krishna's face is always painted chalk white, but his clothes are blue by way of concession to the true historical figure. He wears blue and silver pantaloons. A blue and silver lamé cloth is draped diagonally across his shoulder. Tufts of black frizzy hair wreath his face and hang to his shoulders. On his head he wears a crown of flowers topped by a peacock feather disk. Bracelets, arm bands, anklets, and a hand decoration which extends over the back of the hand from the center fingers to the wrist adorn his limbs. He carries a silver flute tasseled with flowers.

A Ras Lila in Manipur is a riot of lavish colors, all clashing and mixing to make a rich Oriental beauty. The glitter of the jewels, the flashing mirrors and mica on the costumes scintillate in the greenish glow of the gas lights. The flamboyance of the costumes contrasts curiously with the quietly impassive, soft brown, lightly powdered Mongolian faces of the performers. For décor, the pillars of the mandal are covered with specially selected leaves and branches. The dance arena is outlined by a circular mound of earth in which flowers have been temporarily planted. From the center of the roof over the dance square, large white paper cutouts of various perforated designs are suspended. A spirit of celebration and festivity permeates the air. The splendor of a performance is fabulous.

COMPOSITION AND CONSTRUCTION OF RAS LILA A long program of kirtan singing precedes a Ras Lila. This induces the requisite devotional mood and engenders an atmosphere of expectancy. In a series of glowing songs, the kirtan group praises Saint Chaitanya, Joy Singh (using his more poetic name Baghya Chandra or "Lucky Moon"), and the personages of the forthcoming Ras Lila. The music intensifies and accelerates as the time for it to begin approaches. Shortly before the actual Ras Lila, the singers begin to lay the setting by describing the beauties of the forest garden retreat of Brindavan.

The kirtan finishes. The singers put on their turbans and leave the square. Offerings to the gods are made in the center of the arena. The smooth dirt floor is sprinkled lightly with water to keep the dust from rising as the performers dance. The characters required for Ras Lila (Krishna, Radha, and usually twelve Gopis) assemble just outside the mandal.

The Ras Lila orchestra takes its place near the dance arena in one of the right angles formed by the square of the mandal. Ordinarily the orchestra consists of two *pung* drums, an *esraz* (a many-stringed instrument played like a sarongi and sounding like a high, thin oboe), flutes, kartal bell-cymbals, and conches. Singers sit with the orchestra and comprise lead singers, who are women, and a small group of subsidiary male singers of Brahmin caste. The dancers are, of course, also chief singers.

Although all singing is in unison, several different musical effects are achieved. Lack of harmony is compensated for by skillful manipulation of musical layers, intricate rhythmic and melodic subtleties, and the wide vocal range of the singers. The arrangement and groupings of music give variety and approximate the feeling of a large chorus accompanied by several orchestras. The solos, duets, and choruses are alternated and interchanged frequently enough to avoid the monotony of hearing the same type of music over too long a period of time. The music affects and to an extent determines the nature of the dancing and it includes:

Instrumental music of various combinations without voices.

This accompanies passages of pure dancing.

Vocal duets of the two women side singers, which relieve the performers from continuous singing and enable them to gesticulate more freely. These lead side singers generally sing the arias of Radha.

Chorus of male side singers, who generally sing all Krishna's arias, particularly at command performances where Krishna is represented as an idol and is not acted as a role.

The twelve Gopis who each sing full solo arias or sing with others in even-numbered groupings. They speak as well as sing. During arias, gestures are kept at a minimum. During recitatives and spoken lines ordinary daily gestures are used, but they are stylized sufficiently to be aesthetically pleasing.

In outline, Ras Lila is composed of six main sections:

1. Krishna Avishar (Appearance of Krishna)
2. Radha Avishar (Appearance of Radha)
3. Ras Lila proper
4. Bhangi (Argument of the Ras Lila: persuasion of Krishna to join the Ras Lila, rejection of Krishna, rejection of Radha, etc.)
5. Melan (Union: Radha and Krishna reach agreement or dance in mirth or joy with the Gopis)
6. Prathana (Prayer: Radha and Gopis offer Krishna their devotion and pray that they may remain in this state of grace for all eternity)

At the conclusion of the Ras Lila, sacred fire is offered to Krishna as in the evening Shanda Arathi ritual.

The following is the outline of a representative Diba Ras. The form and pattern of movements are similar in all Ras Lilas. Music, work texts, and the movements of dancers and singers are of course altered in accordance with the changes in plot of the other Ras Lilas.

KRISHNA AVISHAR Krishna rises from his seat at one end of the mandal. As the orchestra plays he dances swiftly with many turns, stomping of feet, and gesticulations of the hands. The drums cease and the side singers begin a duet. Krishna pauses as if hearing Radha's voice. He picks up a yellow temple flower which Radha has left for him and dances with joy. He then sits inside a small structure, representing either the cow-herd's shelter or his swing (Krishna's favorite amusement as a child).

RADHA AVISHAR Radha, who has been sitting at a pillar of the mandal directly across from Krishna's place of entry, begins to dance. The song and her gestures describe Krishna's beauty, her affection for him, her loneliness in separation, and her eagerness to rejoin him. Radha music is always warmer and more emotional than the music which accompanies Krishna.

RAS LILA PROPER The opening of this section is called Makok Chingbi (literally, head-lead). It consists of the entry and subsequent action of the leading Gopi who furthers the plot sequence and gives the Ras Lila dramatic progression. This role is played by Brindasaki, the chief Gopi and duenna of Radha, who begins the operatic nature of the performance by singing an aria introducing herself. Throughout the ensuing performance she serves as a leader of the Gopis and steers the child actors who play the parts of Radha and Krishna, into the proper movements if they err or are uncertain.

Brindasaki advises Radha that she must see Krishna before she falls completely ill from separation. Krishna, on his side of the arena, dances. In a short aria he asks, "Where is my Radha?" Brindasaki announces that she is on her way to have a Ras Lila with him. There ensues a long series of recitatives and arias in which Brindasaki describes the beauty of Radha's dancing. She likens Radha to the bow and Krishna to the arrow, "the two will join tightly for the shoot." The remaining Gopis enter and in pantomime and gesture appear to dress and ornament Radha for the coming Ras Lila. Singing repeatedly, "Pleasure knows no bounds," the Gopis form a procession and glide around the dance area. As they approach Krishna in his bower, they chant his name to Radha "in sweet torment of her soul." They sing praises before Krishna and push Radha toward him. The two mount the bower and the Gopis sing an adulatory chorus about the charms and beauty of the pair.

Brindasaki dances in front of them and here commences the actual Ras Lila. The following short sets of dances are a "Ras within a Ras."

Krishna Jagoi Thopa. The conches blow and Krishna dances a solo.

Radha Jagoi Thopa. Radha begins to dance around Krishna who stands with his hands shaped so as to represent a flute symbolically.

Ananga Majuri Thopa. Ananga Majuri (or Rupavali), sister of Radha and a sort of attendant (*saki*), sometimes also played by a child, enters and dances.

The three stand together, each in a basic posture: Krishna with his flute; Radha with her hands in supplication, palms pointing upwards toward Krishna at her side; Ananga with one hand cupped near her ear as if listening to the flute.

The conches mark the finish of these Thopa dances. The Gopis dance in a circle around the trio and sing. They forms pairs and weave in and out among themselves. There is an accelerando, the Gopis make an obeisance, and the conches again blow. The Ras Lila performed by these gods is at an end. The program however continues.

BHANGI Bhangi is the quintessence and climax of the Ras Lila opera. Manipuris have a custom that no one, no matter what the circumstances are, can leave a performance before the completion of the Bhangi section. In it several themes may be developed according to the type of Ras Lila: the separation and estrangement of Krishna and Radha is explained; Krishna and Radha are cajoled or lured back to their normal state of harmony; the Gopis make clear their devotion to Krishna; or the state of divine love among the group is expounded and elaborated. In Bhangi the main, inner theme of the Ras Lila is revealed.

Bhangi derives originally from its counterpart in the Lai Haraoba. Its dance movements indicate the connection with the formation and awareness of the body as an instrument of pleasure shown in Lai Haraobas. On Ras Lila's plane of transport and ecstasy, the body is treated as an agent for adoration

and worship through playful disport and through the duality of enticement and rejection.

The dancers form a circle with a wide break to allow the spectators to see inside the ring as the movements are directed in toward the center where Radha or Krishna or the trio of children stand. As the dancers slowly and restlessly wind around the half circle, their movements invite and rebuff, plead and insist. One characteristic Bhangi movement is the step in which the dancers squat and in a rolling motion of their feet wipe the earth. This is a dance stylization concealing the semen which is presumed to have secreted from the Gopis during their ecstatic dance. Bhangi closes with the Chali movement danced by all the dancers. In the context of the Ras Lila, the pointing gestures of Chali are interpreted either as a movement to protect the breasts from the playful advances of Krishna, or to bring them into prominence in order to attract him.

Kurumba Parang (Salutation-linking). Kurumba Parang is a prostration before Krishna or Radha. The lead singer begins by repeating, "Dekibe, dekibe" (You will see!) in staccato triplets. The Gopis take up the phrase and add their innumerable melodic variations. The side singers repeat it and continue the line, "—how we will sacrifice for your love." The Gopis touch the ground in salutation and link themselves together by each placing the left hand on the shoulder of the Gopi next to her. The right arm remains free to dance-gesticulate.

The Dekibe recitative is followed by a long aria-chorus to the effect, "We will sacrifice all for you. Day and night we are overflowing with your love. We pray to you." The only accompaniment is the sonorous clang of the kartals. The audience listens with silence and concentration. The music of this section is of an extraordinary quality. For sheer emotional power, no finer passage exists in Ras Lila music, and it easily ranks with the best music of any country, Western or Asian.

MELAN (UNION) The singing of the Gopis directed toward Radha and Krishna takes on the aspect of the Jivanyas dance

of the maibis in Lai Haraoba. They seem to be hypnotizing the young child actors and infusing into them the spirit of the gods they are representing in the Ras Lila.

Punglon Jagoi. Radha, Krishna, and Ananda Majuri each dance a separate Punglon Jagoi, a climactic tour de force, performed to the accompaniment of drums (pung) alone. Krishna performs several cartwheels and acrobatics, to which the conches intone their announcement or emphasis. Each Punglon Jagoi ends with an abbreviated Chali movement.

Chali Arebi. The lead singer, Brindasaki, performs a concluding dance called Chali Arebi (roundabout Chali). While keeping the Chali movements as a base, she adds complicated variations. She sinks to the ground in a winding curve and rises while twisting her hands in circles. She moves over the circle of the dance arena in flowing, almost snakelike gestures of twistings and turnings.

PRATHANA (PRAYER) In Basant and Diba Ras Lilas, Prathana takes the form of Avir Khel, or throwing of red powder. The powder, made from dried potato flour and dyed a deep red, is an auspicious symbol of festivals and is thrown during the Holi celebrations. In a stylized dance, the Gopis, carrying trays of powder, throw fistfuls at each other until their faces and hands are stained with the color. Their gestures become curiously accentuated. One interpretation of the powder throwing in the Ras is that Krishna represents the sun, and Radha the star Libra, which at Ras times is at a 180 degree angle from the sun. The Gopis with their sprays of red powder symbolize the rays of the sun.

Krishna and Radha mount the bower and the Gopis worship at their feet and dance around the circle while making the Chali movement.

Arathi. The concluding section, which coincides with the rising sun of dawn, is Arathi or sacred fire worship. During it the audience remains standing. Flaming trays of fire are brought into the arena and the dancers spin them around as they perform what has come to be known in a vulgar version

as the Manipuri Fire Dance. The Gopis run their hands over the fire and touch their faces in worship. Powder is thrown at the fire, and the Ras Lila is concluded.

OTHER LILAS Formerly there were many dance-opera type lilas. Today however only Ras Lilas and the Gour Lila remain. Gour Lila is the story of Gouranga (*gour*—fair, *anga*—skinned; another name of Chaitanya) who finds himself to be an *avatar* (incarnation) of Krishna. He joins in this life with other avatars and cowherd cronies of Krishna's time and begins a religious revival. Except for the comic interludes, it is sung, like a Ras Lila, in Old Bengali. The central characters are performed by children, but adult roles are taken by professionals who assist the children in their actions, cues, entries, and exits. There are many arias, duets, choruses, and dances. In addition to the Lila orchestra, there is a boy's kirtan which supplies musical interludes, drum, and kartal dances as part of the plot which describes Chaitanya's original kirtans as a youth.

Gour Lila is performed as an act of devotion when a parent wishes to further his child spiritually in some way. Great benefit to the entire village is supposed to accrue from these performances. The children are, of course, eager participants and contribute joyfully to the festive spirit of the occasion.

From the connection with Krishna's divine play, the word *lila* came to be a generic term for any theatrical performance. There are thirty so-called lila troupes in Manipur at present. Their performances take place each year for three months beginning usually in April. They enact straight plays rather than dance-operas of the Ras Lila type. Although these lilas are popular in the remoter villages, the modern theatre in the larger towns has virtually ousted them. They are old-fashioned with their religious subject matter and episodic, broadly humorous interludes. They lack the color and artistic appeal of the operatic lilas, and cannot compete in intellectual satisfaction with the plays of daily life of the modern theatre. As Manipur becomes more aware of the outside world, her interest in social criticism and modern theatrical expression increases.

Imphal alone, a town of only a few thousands, now supports seven active professional modern theatre troupes.

MISCELLANEOUS DANCES Lai Haraoba, Maiba-maibi Dances, Pala Dances of Kirtans, and Ras and Gour Lilas are all highly developed and advanced art forms. Their technical skill, intricacy of detail, and professional finish place them far above and beyond classification as national folk dances of a people. But Manipur, being a nation of dancers, has in addition a large number of miscellaneous simpler dances which are performed by the people at large. They can be considered as folk art but the excellence with which they are performed lifts them into a professional category. Among these dances are the following:

Rakhal or Cowherd's Dance, performed by large numbers of gaily costumed young boys of a village, portrays the exploits of Krishna as a child. It is usually performed in the springtime in the open fields.

Dhol and Tafari Dance is a virtuoso piece of dancing with drums. *Dhol* is a larger and thicker version of a *pung*. *Tafari* is an octagonal wooden frame about two feet in diameter covered like a tambourine, on one side only with tightly drawn hide. The dancers perform in groups of two or four while beating their different drums. *Dhol* and *Tafari* dances are usually performed before the Juggernaut cart as it is pulled through the village streets in the month of November. The different drums try to imitate the sounds of the other, and much play is made in the contrasting harsh and violent beating with the delicate waving of the arms and hands in typical, soft Manipuri dance style. The dance is masculine and vigorous, and a wide variety of body movements center around the complicated and energetic manipulation of the drums.

In Manipur there are several kinds of social folk dances, of which the most famous is *Tabal Chongbi* (Jumping in the Moonlight). It is performed only during the bright full moon between March and April at Holi time. Holi in Manipur is a sort of Hindu Saturnalia, and during the "jumping in the moonlight," stranger and friend, whether high or low, mix freely.

Outside various houses throughout the towns or villages, dance parties are arranged. Anyone may participate and break into the circle to dance. The only restriction is that two boys or two girls should not be together, so as to upset the hand-holding circle of alternating boys and girls. This is often hampering as the ratio of women to men in Manipur, oddly enough, is five to one.

Tabal Chongbi varies only slightly from house to house; the mode of dancing is uniform. Around a pole, at the foot of which is a balsam mound with offerings, the dancers form a circle. A singer stands in the center and intermittently shouts, "*Hari bou la*" (Hail to God). The dancers echo his words. The singer begins to improvise a story of Krishna. He interpolates shouts of praise from time to time. "We are dancing (jumping) for our god," "We are dancing (jumping) for our country," etc. The dancers as they move around in the circle repeat his chant. The movements of the dancers are limited. They may either walk straight around the circle, or they may form a *lairen mathek* zigzag. To these base movements the jumping movement is added by swinging the right leg over the left, followed by the left leg over the right. The meter is a simple four-four and the dancers' locked hands rise and fall with the swinging legs. While continuing the jumping, the circle from time to time breaks and an intertwining chain is formed which winds in and out around the dance area.

Like most folk dances, Tabal Chongbi is more amusing to perform than to watch. It is treated as an excuse for boys and girls to hold each others' hands, and is the one time of the year that both sexes may stay out into the small hours of the morning, supposedly dancing in homage to the gods.

The origin of Tabal Chongbi is legendary. It is said at the time of the creation of the world, earth was placed on the head of the serpent god, Pakhanba. He was pained by the pressure of the earth settling into place and would not keep still. Siva sent seven heavenly Apsaras to dance this Tabal Chongbi. They danced so delicately that the serpent forgot his torment and the earth was finally packed tightly onto his

head. The seven maidens did not leave the area, and begot the seven clans of Manipur. The dance later developed into the Augri Hangel which is sometimes performed at the end of Lai Haraobas, as a dance of victory which consolidates the defeat of an enemy village. Because of this connection, Tabal Chongbi and its derivatives can not be performed either by or in the presence of the Maharaja.

PRINCIPLES OF MANIPURI DANCING Manipuri dancing, despite the high standard of perfection to which it has developed, and despite the wide variety of repertoire which it employs, reduces itself to surprisingly few and rather deceptively simple factors. The Manipuri word for dance is *jagoi*, derived from the Sanskrit word *chakra* meaning circle. All Manipuri dancing is performed in the form of a circle or the half circle. This basic formation of the dance signifies the circular nature of the Manipuri valley, and by extension, the world, and therefore associates all dance with the creation of the world. Psychologically, dance in Manipur is a creative function interpreting the origins of existence. The movements of the dance itself imitate microcosmically the macrocosmic circle. Manipuri dancing is never angular in any of its movements. Even the most difficult and complicated movements give the impressions of rounded ease and fluid simplicity.

The two basic gestures of Manipuri dance are the *kurumba* and the "spinning" gesture. The *kurumba* is the salutation (in execution, a two-handed, double circle movement of the wrists) which punctuates all sections of the dance. The "spinning" gesture of the outspread fingers curling in toward the body, is used by the maibis to invoke the gods, but more often in other dances to symbolize the spinner's circular wheel (*chakra*).

The most active parts of the body are the hands which represent the *lasya* aspect of the dance. The feet are *tandava*, and they are given any heavy aspects of the dance movements to perform. Elbows are lightly held close to the waist. As a general rule the hands alternate their movements. If the right palm is upward, the left palm faces downward. Characteristic

of many of the hand gestures is the "flick." When the hand is bent half closed at the knuckle joints, the dancer suddenly flicks it open. This occurs always during movements when the palms are alternating in facing upward and downward. Each movement is repeated three times in Manipuri dancing, thus theoretically paying homage to heaven, earth, and the underworld. Accelerandi always mark the conclusion of a dance section.

Contrary to popular belief in India and abroad, there are three actions which Manipuri dancing eschews: the head-sliding and the use of ankle bells and of facial expression (*abhinaya*). The movement of the head from side to side, characteristic of Indian and most Asian dancing, means a kind of sensual pleasure, delight, and anticipation. The aesthetics of Manipuri dancing with their ecstasy and spiritualized eroticism leave no room for lustful or worldly expression. Ankle bells are unnecessary. Feet play a relatively minor part in Manipuri dance. The soft, flowing arm movements are best matched and accentuated by the muffled stomping of feet coming in contact with earth. Percussive emphasis is assigned to the orchestra. Unlike other Indian dance, Manipuri dancing requires that the eyes remain impassive. While contravening the *Bharata Natya Sastra*, the quiet of the face is suitable to Mongolian features and allies the dance with the Far East rather than with India. *Abhinaya*, with its meanings and interpretive expressions, is entirely absent from Manipuri dancing. Facial expression is brought into play only in the spoken or recitative portions of the *Ras Lilas* a part of drama.

Some gestures have meaning, but most of them are what the Manipuri call "narto," or ornament. Manipuris defend the lack of explicitness of their dances by the fact that meaning can not be beautiful without ornament. "We, therefore, deal with the beauty part of dance by itself," they say always. The result is that Manipuri dancing, rather than being a combination or *nritta* and *nriya*, is a blend of *nritta* and, in the sense of drama or opera, *natya*.

Very little body training and exercise is necessary for the

Manipuri to learn how to dance. His master gives and natural mode of living gives him an advantage. He begins to dance as soon as he is old enough to walk, and the grace required in dancing soon becomes second nature to him. This early beginning of the dance is childlike & elemental in certain ways. From the outset, the child learns to stay in dance. He does as he is told without understanding why. As soon as he is old enough to grasp the meaning of dance, its spirit, and intellectual nature of the dance, he is slowly & capably dancer and his curiosity has gone. The sad is that few Manipuri dancers ever understand their dance intellectually, and are therefore incapable of explaining it in some other than dance body movement. To some extent the reason for the deterioration of modern and modern in Manipur. What is left however is a charming, unintellectual but naturally full dance form. To use the Manipuri word, the dance is "ornamental." In its religious aspects when coupled with song, this ornamental dance takes on genuine aesthetic personality.

Dance in Manipur is kept within its original proportion. The guiding spirit is religion, and the body and its movements are the highest dedication of the human being to his gods. Sports and dance are also inextricably connected in Manipur. God is worshipped through best being, the Lila, jallo ("In case of epidemics, after a stick and a bit to the gods," it says in the Meithei holy books regarding ludo and jallo), folk dances, mountain climbing (necessary to reach where the best Ras Lila are often performed), and Lal Barua. All are part of one devotion. Manipuri in the religion without physical culture is no religion. It is the dance, according to them it is physical culture such as not "ornamental" and all for the glory of the gods.