

CLASSICAL TRADITION OF NATA MOVEMENTS

Prof. E. Nilkantha Singh

To many, the Manipuri Vaishnavas are a strange people. They often weep or cry or lie prostrate at the mere mention of Lord Krishna or Radha, in the midst of a *samkirtana* performance. When Radha, in the role of an *Abhisarika Nayika* — the fearless heroine — begins dressing herself, the devout Vaisnava weeps — a sight which is certainly unintelligible from the traditional Hindu poetics. To understand the heart and mind of a Manipuri Vaisnava, one has to go to the depth of Vaisnava aesthetics as interpreted by the revered *goswamins* of Vrindavan. Particular mention may be made of the two outstanding works, *Bhakti Rasamrta sindhu* followed by the supplement, *Ujjvala Nilamani*, of Rupa Goswamin, who attempted a reorientation to the understanding of the *Rasa-Sastra*, as the Vaisnavas conceive of it. The love of Krishna (*Krishna-rati*) becomes the dominant feeling — *sthayi-bhava* which, through its appropriate excitants, *vibhavas* as well as ensuants, *anubhavas* — and auxiliary feelings — *vyabhicaribhavas* — is raised to a supreme relishable condition of the Vaisnava heart as the *Bhakti-rasa*. *Bhakti*, to the Manipuri Vaishnava, is not a *bhava* but a *rasa* which admits of five types — *Santa* (with *sama-bhava*), *Prita* (with *dasatva bhava*), *Preyas* (with

sakhyabhava), *Vatsalya*, (with *vatsala-bhava*) and *Madhura* (with *Madhura-rati*), after *Bhakti Rasamrta-sindhu*. And of the five, the last one, namely *Madhura rasa*, is the most important. Being known as *Bhakti-rasa-raj*, it is the subject of a very detailed treatment in *Ujjvala Nilamani* of Rupa Gosvamin. The eternal play of Krishna and the *gopis*, with Radha as the most prominent of them is the theme dear to the hearts of the Manipuri Vaishnavas.

A *sloka* from the standard work on Manipuri Dance, *Govinda Sangeet Leela Vilas* of Rajarshi Bhagyachandra (1764-89 A.D.)¹ says that dance is not merely for amusement or recreation but mostly for the love of the Lord, Bhagavat — *naratanam bhagavat bhakteh anubhavataya matam na kevam vilasasya vinodasva ca sadhanam*. It is meant for *bhagavat-priti-bhagavat-priti-hetutvat* and represents the time-old tradition of the Manipuris — *Manipuri vasinam esa visuddha ya parampara*. All the dances, and festivals and *leelas* of the Manipuri Vaishnavas are *bhakti*-oriented and they have got to be approached and appreciated from the *bhakti* point of view. As a matter of fact, the life cycle of a Manipuri is marked by a series of *samkirtanas* in its various stages—birth, *sasthi puja* on the sixth day, *anna prasana*, *karnabedhi*, adopting the sacred thread, marriage, death — at the various stages of cremation, *asthi samchayan*, *shraddha*—and anniversary. *Samkirtanas* constitute the soul of Manipuri culture and it is aptly recognised as the *mahayajna* by every devout Vaishnava.

The artistes of the *samkirtanas* known as *nata kirtakas* are described thus by *Govinda Sangeet Leela Vilas*: *Stre va atha puruso vapi natah san gunakirtanam karoti ishasva yah sabhinayam sa natakirtaka*. This is after the conventional classification of the artistes, with a particular accent on *bhakti*. But the Manipuris follow a distinctive tradition of *garga carya* according to which, *natya*, is divided into *rupaka* and *rasaka* in which songs and dance predominate — *pradhanayam nritya gitadeh samlapadi apradhanyata*. And of the six types of *rasaka* — *maha*, *manju vasanta*, *nitya*, *nirbesa gopa* and *talak*, the last type of *rasaka* has a special

1. *Govinda Sangeet Leela Vilas* by Rajarshi Bhagyachandra (1764 — 89 A.D.). Regarding this work, there is at present a controversy about its origin and authorship.

reference to the *samkirtana* performances of the *natakirtakas*. The *tala rasaka* admits of two types — *talika* (with the hands clapping) and *natapalli* in which the metal instruments are used — *natapallyam tu talah syad ghana vadyena sarvada*. This *natapalli* which admits of both *lasya* and *tandava* aspects, is further subdivided into *ghana melaka* and *dhruva melaka* (with 14 *mridangas* used by the *nartakas*) known as *Dhrumel* by the Manipuris. The *natakirtaka* of the various *samkirtanas* come under the *natapalli* group.

It must be mentioned in this connection that the Manipuris follow a distinctive tradition which I am inclined to characterise as *nartana-vartika* tradition as distinguished from the *Natyashastra* tradition of Bharat Muni. While describing the three traditions of *sangeet* the author of *Govinda Sangeet Leela Vilas* makes a special reference to this Manipuri tradition — *Garga Naradadyam Citrarathadeems Ca Sampradayagatah*. Because Brahma, as the story goes, having learnt the art from Vishnu, taught the *Natyaveda* at the request of *Purandara* (Indira) to *Gandharvaraj Chitraratha*, *Bharat* and *Garga-Gandharva raj Bharat Gargadibhyo dadou muda*. At the command of *Indra*, *Chitraratha* taught it along with its *angas* and *upangas* to *Arjuna* who again imparted the *shastra* to *Uttara* of the *Virata* King and later to the women of *Dvaraka*. The classification of *lasya* into two, and of the *tandava* style into *calanam*, *gunthanam* and *prasaranam* is after the work, *Nartana Vartika* of which *Chitraratha* is the author, while the division of the *rasakas* into six follows *rasa Prakasa* of *Gargacharya* who was the teacher of *Krishna* in the house of *Nanda* and *Yasoda* — both of which represent a very ancient *Vaishnava* tradition. From a comparative study of the prevalent treatises like *Natyashastra*, *Sangeet Ratnakara*, *Abhinaya Darpana* etc., I have a feeling that *Gargacharya* might be a later addition of the medieval age whereas *Citraratha* must have been a very ancient one as *gandharvas* find a respectful mention in the various classical treatises. It is only a pity the two great works viz. *Nartana Vartika* and *Hasaparakasa* are nowhere available and hardly recognised even at this stage of research on classical Indian dance at the moment. One feels one is reading a book of which the first page is missing. We have to depend entirely on *Govinda Sangeet Leela Vilas* which is based on the two books for a proper appreciation of the distinctive classical heritage of Manipuri Dance.

Of the three aspects of *tandava* style, *Gunthanam* represents movements of the limbs (*anga viksepanam*) with a lot of *bhramari utplavana* (jumping) and *upavesana* (sitting) while the two legs and the knees are to be kept as close as possible. There should be only a distance of a *tala* between two legs. There should be no thrusting from (*praksepa*), shaking (*kampana*) hip movements (*nitamva-chalana*) in this style. This *tandava* style, though indicative of vigour (*oudhyata*), is based on *sattva-guna* (*sattvagunasryama*) and is still graceful (*soumyatam*). This is much used in the *gostha bhangi pareng* and slightly less in *nata* movement.

In the second style of *tandava* known as *calanam* the standing postures for the males — *purusasthanakas* (numbering 17, after *Nartana Vartika*) are appropriately used. There is much movement up and down in almost an endless series of movements with the heels touching occasionally and in the traingular and rectangular poses (*tryasram chaturasrakam*). The thighs and knees are to be kept apart. At the first downward movement (sitting) the wrists are to be kept on the knees; the next sitting involves the elbows resting on the knees with the trunk loose (*sithilam*) and the head bent (*nata*). The movements of the legs can be from the calves, knees or thighs. Hands are not be kept on the head or below the navel. What is popularly known as *cholom* (either of Karatala or Pung) of the various *samkrtanas* of Manipur is a corrupted expression of *Calana* which constitutes the basic movements of *Natapall*. The last *tandava* style, *prasaranam* in which movements are more exaggerated and free is mostly used for dances representing fights (*samgramabhinayartham*).

I shall not in to a detailed discussion of the various movements of *angas*, *upangas* and *pratyangas*, most of which exist in this distinctive dance tradition and are also thoroughly analysed in the book, *Govinda Sangeet Leela Vilas*. Apart from slight differences in the number and nomenclature of the various movements of the limbs *Govinda Sangeet Leela Vilas* preserves almost all the classifications as are found in the various treatises like *Natyashastra*, *Abhinaya Darpanam* etc. But following the tradition, there is little discussion about eyebrows, eyelids, pupils, cheeks which are not used much in Manipuri Dance — *Sampradayibhedena sthulanam ha darsanam*. What matters ultimately is not

the classifications so much as the pattern of movements — the co-ordinated harmonisation of the various limbs in the total image of a distinctive Manipuri style. There is much stillness, softness and suggestiveness in the Manipuri style which gives a definite accent on what can be called *angikabhinaya*. Much is left to the on-lookers to perfect the meaning of the *angikabhinaya* in which were being became insignificant and sometimes superfluous. I am prepared to call it a characteristic eastern tradition — the tradition of the *Gandharvas*, of the *Nartana Vartika* tradition which has its roots in the heart of the people.

Strictly speaking, *Natapalli* admits of both the *tandava* and *lasya* styles. But what is popularly known as *Nata Kirtanas* indicates the *tandava* style in which the *Calanam tandava* is predominant. This *samkirtana* which finds supreme flowering in Manipur has been wonderfully adapted and conceived in the distinctive Manipuri pattern of a prayer — a form of a *rasaka*, while keeping the spirit of the strict Vaisnava aesthetics.

In the traditional *samkirtana* there are usually 16 artists forming a circle in the *mandap* under the following analysis: One *abhineta* (called *Isheihanba* in Manipuri), 3 of his assistants, one imitator of *abhineta* (called *dohara*), 9 of his assistants and 2 players on *mridanga* (*pung*). According to *Govinda Sangeet Leela Vilas* the number may be 16, 32 or 64. The entire group is called *nata pala*, after the Bengali term, *pala*. The *mandap* has the centre with a rounded plantain leaf and with a piece of cloth as the seat (*asana*) on it and other *puja* materials like lamp, *pan* and fruits. This is called *mandali puja* as 5 of the Vaisnava gods — Shri Krishna Chaitanya, Nityananda, Advaita, Gadadhar and Srivasa — are supposed to be seated and are worshipped when the *samkirtana* starts with the *adhivasa*. On this day a flag is also dedicated to the Lord to avoid any obstacles which might come in the way of the *samkirtana*. According to Panditraj Atombapu, this corresponds to, *Jarjara Puja* for Indra as described in the *Natyashastra*. Four earthen pots (called *ghata*) are placed in the four corners of the *mandap* to signify points of worship.

There are strict restrictions with regard to the style of dress. All the *nata kirtakas* must observe 12 *tilakas*, wear *tulasi malas* around the

neck and adopt sacred threads. Each should wear the *dhoti* in the *trikatcha* style and have a white turban on and remain seated with knees touching the ground. The big five — *Isheihanba*, *dohar*, *khombanba* and two *mridanga* players should show proper respect to the distinguished assembly by lying prostrate (*dandavat pranam*) before all directly they make their proper introduction to the gathering of the *rasikas*.

According to the Vaishnavic treatise, *Bhakti Ratnakara*, the *khola* (*mridanga*) and *kartala* constitute the wealth of Lord Chaitanya and both are to be worshipped. Following this tradition, the 16 sets of *kartalas* (*ghana vadyas*) and two *mridangas* are worshipped with lamps, *tilaka* and incense (in the *nirajana* or *arati* manner) along with the *nartakas* who may be compared to the priests of a *yajna* which every *samkirtana* really is. Clothes are distributed to each artist in place of money, after the tradition, by the performer of the *yajna*. This is the *adhivasa* stage of a *samkirtana yajna* — *samskarah Gandham Malyadyeih Yah Syat tat Adhivasanam*.

The president of the assembly (called *Mandap Mapu* in Manipuri) then makes the *dhvani*:

Valaha Premse Kaha Shri Radhakrishna Valaha Prabhu Nityai Chaitanya Advaita Kahata santa sadho Madhuras Vani Hare Hare. When this recitation reaches the expression *Chaitanya*, the *mridanga* players strike with the *bola* — *Ten Ten Tat Tah Tang* — which is known as the beginning of the *raga* of *mridanga*. The conch player starts aloud with his conch in a significant sound. The *mridanga raga* is followed immediately by the *raga* of the particular song which starts with the *alapa* — *Ta A Ri Ta Na Na A*. This corresponds to *Ha, ri, te, na* of *Sangeet sara* and is really the *alapa* portion of the particular *raga* chosen by the *Isheihanba* (*Abhineta*). Before this *alapa* stage, the *mridanga raga* will go along with a recitation from *Isheihanba* — *Krishna Priti Ananda Hari bolo*, to which all the remaining *nartakas* respond with one voice — “*Hare Hare*” This will be followed by a series of *mridanga bolas* along with the striking sound of the *karatalas* known as a *sanchar* of *mridanga*. When this finishes, the *Isheihanba* starts with *Sabha vandana* and *Guru vandana* and returns to his original *raga* which should deal with a theme of Chaitanya known as ‘*Gourachandra*’. This is to be followed by a few *padavali*

songs appropriate to the occasion, be it *shraddha*, marriage or any other ceremony. The *talas* of the *mridanga* also should pass through the gats of *tintala*, small or big as Manipuris call it *trikuta* or *tritiyaka*, after Govinda Sangeet Leela Vilas, *tanchap* (*chaturasra ekatala*) and *menkup* (*tryasra ekatala*). The songs are to be sung by all seated in a distinctive posture.

The next and most important stage is known as *Rajmel* which is derived from a particular *tala*, *rajmel* (seven beats and two stresses in the *Vilamvita laya*). All the artists, after making a bow to each other in the *panchanga* way should rise and start initiating a new song or pick the continuation of the old song which depends on the choice of the *Isheihanba*. *Rajmel* admits of some important stages : *bedighat*, *lambi ghat*, *melhou* (the real *rajmel*), *setughat*, *melon* (in the *menkup laya-madhya*) and *men thaba* (in the *druta laya*). At the first stage of *bedighat*, all the *kirtakas* should move in an anti-clock-wise direction for a full round and while doing so, the *Ishei hanba* should bow down before the *dohara* and the two *mridanga* players with their *kartalas* touching the *mridanga* and the hand touching the *partala* of the *doharai*, afterwards placing it on the forehead. The remaining *nartakas* also, after the round, bow down to each other and then stand up and start singing. This is supposed to be a very sacred position which should in no case be disturbed. *Lambi ghat* then comes in and leads to the very complicated *calanam* movements in the *vilamvita laya* with the *rajmela tala*. This is followed by *setu ghat* which results in a quicker tempo (*madhya laya*) of the movements known as *melon*.

The final climax comes with a fast tempo (*druta laya*) and the *kartalas* and the *mridanga bolas* striking almost in ecstasy with perfect synchronisation and with all the *nartakas* shouting "ehhh" upto the climax which is compared to the 'stava' of the Bhagavat which describes the divine bird Garuda carrying the image of Lord Krishna with wing flapping and reciting all the four *vedas*. This is indeed a grand imagination after the Manipuri scholar, Panditraj Atombapu, which is supported by a statement that *kirtanas* are always seen and not listened to—*Kirtana Darsanaya*. Many old *rasikas* would start rushing in at this climax and weeping and crying in *ananda* would lie prostrate before the five, including the *mridanga* players.

This will be followed by the *tala tanchap* and then by the *tala-menkup* in which the *dohara* will execute graceful *calanam* movements and he will be followed by others. The *mridanga* players will strike *prastaras* known as *Alanakar pumlon*, which will be followed again by a climax. The *nartakas* will then remain seated in a distinctive posture and sing some *rasas* like *sambhog*, *jalakeli* and *svadhin*. The *samkritanahas* almost come to a close at this stage and they are indeed marking time, as it were, waiting for the order of present. The conclusion will be provided by themes dealing with six *Gosvamins* (six *Gosvamins* of Vrindavan), *Jaya Bhai chaitanya Nityai* and finally all will shout — *Valaha Prem se Kaho Shri Radhe Krishna — Haribola Haribola*. When the *kirtana* concludes, the above-mentioned five will bow down to the distinguished audience as if waiting for their reactions, words of praise and appreciation, which the audience liberally shower upon them.

The second type of *Natapalli* known as *Dhruva melaka* represents also an unique type of *samkirtana*. There are 14 *mridanga* players in it and the same formalities will be applied, perhaps in a much stricter way and with more details. The accent here is on the complicated *talas* known as *sacharas* which are 14 in number and dedicated to 14 personalities. The president will make the *jayadhvani* first with the following words — *Shri Krishna Caitanya Priti ananda Haribolo Haribolo*, to which the remaining *nartakas* will respond with “Hare Hare.” This first *Caitanya Mridanga Sanchar* will be followed by 13 remaining independent *sancharas* dedicated respectively to *Nityananda Advaita*, *Gadadhar*, *Shrivasa*, *Dvadasa Gopal*, *Asta Mahanta*, six *Gosvamins*, sixty four *mahantas*, *Goura Bhakta Vrinda*, *sat sampradaya*, fourteen *mridangas*, all the *bhaktas* and lastly *Shrined Radha Govinda*. *Dhruva melaka samkirtana* is a highly stylised pattern of *Yajne* which involves a lot of training, expense and patience. It admits of 4 types — *maha dhruvamelaka* (known as *maha dhrumel*), *goura dhrumel* (composed during the reign of Maharaja Naresingh 1834 A.D.) *nityai dhrumel* and *leirema dhrumel* (composed during the reign of Maharaja Chandrakirti 1860 A.D.).

Historically speaking, *nata kirtanas* first assumed the name of *Bangadesh Pala* during the reign of king Garibniwaz (1814 A.D.) with slight differences in the styles of dress, singing and even the size and

look of the *mridanga*. The king adopted the *Ramanandi* cult and hence prayers were offered to Rama Krishna and Govinda. It is also called *Bangadesh* from the fact that a Bengali *kirtaniya* group introduced the form of *kirtana*. In the *Bangadesh Dhruamel*, another *sanchara*, known as *Gourachandra* has been added making the number altogether 15. There is not much difference between the old *Bangadesh* and the new *sankirtana* so far as the basic aspects and attitudes are concerned. Both the *nata kirtaka* groups are receiving the patronage of the raja of Manipur even now.

To the Manipuri Vaishnavas *sankirtana* is really a *Maha Yajna* — a form of worship and prayer, associated closely with the life of the people. The Sanskrit work, *Narada samhita* sums up beautifully this spirit: "I do not dwell in heaven, nor in the heart of Yogis, nor in the Sun. There only I abide, O Narada, where my lovers sing."

Prof. Nilkantha Singh teaches Philosophy at the Government D. N. College, Imphal but his interest in the music and dance of Manipur is of scholarly depth. He presented a paper at the Geet Govind Seminar held by the Sangeet Natak Akademi in Delhi in 1967 and has participated in Seminars on aspects of Manipuri dance. He writes on the subject for newspapers and journals.