

Aspects On Louise Lightfoot's Attempt To Popularise Manipuri Dance In Australia, New Zeland And Japan (1938-1958)

*Dr. R.K. Tamphasana

Associate Professor Department of History Govt. G.P. Women's College
Corresponding Author: Dr. R.K. Tamphasana

ABSTRACT: A relatively unexplored area of investigation in the study of Manipuri dance and theatre is the initiatives that Louise Lightfoot (an Australian), a well known Choreographer and impresario had taken up during 1938-58 for promotion of Manipuri form of Classical dance to a wider audience in India as well as abroad including Australia, New Zealand and Japan, she pioneered Manipuri dance abroad, lecturing & presenting performances in the leading cultural institutions of these countries.

Keywords: Choreographer, Impresario, Ballet, Maestros, Percussionist, Vocalist.

Date of Submission: 24 -07-2017

Date of acceptance: 08-08-2017

I. INTRODUCTION

Born at Yangery, Victoria, Australia in 1902 L. Lightfoot graduated from the University of Melbourne. While still a student she began a four-year apprenticeship in the architectural office of W.B. Griffin and M.M. Griffin in Melbourne and it was during those days that Lightfoot exhibited artistic inclination (*Mary Louise Lightfoot and Marian Quartly, 2005*). Encouraged by M.M. Griffin she began to study Greek dances although she found it a little dull (*Mary Louise Lightfoot and Marian Quartly, 2005*). In 1926 she had an opportunity to see the great Russian ballerina Anna Pavlova perform the famous ballet 'Grand Russian ballet' and the event proved to be a turning point of her career as she met the character dancer Misha Burlakov. She persuaded him to teach her Russian dance (*Mary Louise Lightfoot and Marian Quartly, 2005*). In 1928 she left the Griffin's and began working with Burlakov for charity performances and amateur opera. By 1931, the 'Lightfoot- Burlakov Classic Dance School' was formerly established. For the first time in her career in November 1931, Lightfoot and Misha gave a ballet performance at Sydney's Savoy theatre and it was followed by many other dance dramas for the theatre lovers of Sydney. During one of her tours to Europe in the late 1930's Lightfoot was attracted to the exotic spectacle of Indian dance maestro Uday Shankar's performance. She came to India after dissolving her partnership with Misha and went to Kerala to study Kathakali- the traditional dance drama performed only by males in Hindu temples. She immersed herself in the study of Kathakali and did extensive study on the dance form. She also toured along with the Kathakali Group studying and promoting Indian dance abroad.

II. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The objective of the study is to highlight the role of the foreign experts, artists, Choreographer, and impresarios to promote Manipuri form of Classical dance to a wider audience in India as well as abroad including Australia, New Zealand and Japan, during the immediate post II- World War period. Louise Lightfoot was indeed the first Australian Choreographer and writer who not only popularized but also had researched and published a monograph entitled 'Ritual Dances of Manipur' (1958).

III. METHODOLOGY

Historical descriptive methodology has been use in the present study. Accordingly the work is primarily based on available published works corroborated by field investigation i.e interview of existing dance Gurus and other knowledgeable persons. The collected data -both primary and secondary have been analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively whenever necessary.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

No serious research based study on the role of foreign impresarios and choreographers to popularize Manipuri dance outside India has so far been taken up. Beginning with Australia Louis Lightfoot assisted by two Manipuri performing artists i.e RK Priyo Gopal Sana and Laishram Lakshman Singh gave lecture demonstrations and other dance performances in different theaters across Australia, New Zealand and Japan

thereby leaving behind a deep impression in the minds and psyche of the theatre loving people of the above countries. In the second phase Lightfoot had travelled along with Ksh. Ibetombi Devi to Australia to give a number of Manipuri dance performances. Since then different Manipuri dance troupes have been visiting different countries in Europe, USA, Far-east and other South East Asian countries to give performances and thereby popularize different items of Manipuri dance.

In 1939 in one of her visit to India, Louis Lightfoot met Guru R.K. Surjaboro Sana and his son R.K. Priya Gopal Sana of 'Nriya Kalaya' - a brain child of Shrimati Tagore. Lightfoot was immediately attracted to Manipuri dance form and dreamed of making Manipuri dance maestros work together with the Kala Mandalam troupe of Ananda Shivaram, a famous Kathakali dancer and her teacher. Lightfoot convinced Priya Gopal to visit Oota Camund (India). Subsequently a few years after the 2nd world war Lightfoot planned to visit Manipur (*Louise Lightfoot, 1958: 24*) for a talent search programme. She sounded Priya Gopal to make preparation for a trip round the globe on a minimalist scale with only 2-3 artists preferably one Percussionist and one Vocalist. Finally as suggested by the impresario Priya Gopal with the assistance of Laishram Lakshman Singh, a long time associate and an expert of a wide range of percussion instruments, viz : Manipuri Pung (Mridangam) Khol, Pakhewaj, Dholak, Khanjuri, Dafat (Tafat) (R.K. Dani Sana, R.K. Priya Gopal Sana as Cultural Beacon in *H. Dwija Sekhar , 2013:1143*) along with recorded Music began to plan for Australian tour. Before the scheduled programme materialized, in 1949 the Australian impresario led a team of 3 Manipuri artists i.e. Priya Gopal, Lakshman and S. Kulla Singh to participate in the All India Cultural Conference at Delhi. On the 3rd day of the function, when the turn of the Manipuri troupe came Lightfoot dressed in the traditional women's attire of *Phanek and Enaphi* introduced the different items to be given in the next two days. Priya Gopal's *Khamba dance* and Laksman's simultaneous playing of *nine Tabla* were applauded by the crowd and the national papers published from Delhi appreciated the performance of the Manipuri troupe.

When she arrived at Imphal in 1951, she stayed in an old army building located at D.M. College campus. The place in fact was used as an office of a local contractor Yumnam Gourmani singh who was awarded the Project of constructing the D.M. College Academic building (R.K. Dani Sana, R.K. Priya Gopal Sana as Cultural Beacon in *H. Dwija Sekhar ,2013: 1143*). As the team led by Lightfoot reached Perth in May 1951 by a British Ship from Bombay, Australian media persons and other cultural enthusiast whom Lightfoot had already contacted gave a warm reception. In fact there was already wide publicity through posters and newspaper advertisement about the proposed cultural programmes. In fact Indian dances had provoked much interest in Australia by the performances given by Shiva Ram, the famous Kathakali dancer between 1947-1950. In Petah hotel, Perth Lightfoot anchored the Manipuri dance programme performed by the two artists and the programme was shown consecutively in the next five days. The different recitals of Priya Gopal i.e. *Basanta Nriya, Khamba dance* etc exhibited amazing Physical movement. The instrumental items of Lakshman " 'Anganao' (Sound pattern produced by Khunjari a kind of Tambourine) and 'Nada- Mala' (playing of 9 Tablas) received tremendous applause from the audience. Priya Gopal also gave lecture demonstrations on Manipuri dance with the assistance of the Australian anchor. In August the team under the auspices of Arts Council, performed at the Australia Hall, Angas street on alternate days of the week.

In September when rain set in, the trio moved to Melbourne and put up at the residence of Lightfoot for some weeks before they moved to the next city i.e. Adelaide. By this time the two Manipuri Artists had become quite convergent in English with the help of Lightfoot's brother. The press review of Priya Gopal and Lakshman's recital at some of the prominent theatres of Adelaide were highlighted as "Indian Temple dancer Priya Gopal ...in Adelaide sometime uses a 64 piece Orchestra with only one musician (*Adelaide Mail, 1951*). On subsequent days Adelaide Mail reported." Dancer Priya Gopal said: His dances all had religious significance". The team also visited Sydney and stayed at Misha's ballet school where some items on Manipuri dance were staged. On 13th September, Sunday Herald reported that the Performance of the Manipuri dancers exhibited "Strong rhythmic impetus" (*The Sunday Herald, 1951*).

In October, the team moved to New Zealand and spent 3- 4 months giving performances in different parts of the country. In this sector Lightfoot had engaged a local programme manager, Mr. Goodman who took the responsibility of arranging itinerary and programmes of the team. Mr. Goodman took a lot of care to make the teams cultural performances successful. Priya Gopal and Laksham gave a performance at Embassy Theatre in Manipuri dance items ie. Shiva Sanghar, Khouсарol, Nada-Mala etc along with a ballet. It was for the first time that the team presented a ballet based on religious themes. The 'Walkato Times' also reported that the Manipuri dancers adhered to the values of thousands of years old Manipuri Tradition (*The Walkato Times,1951*). The team also gave a performance at Auckland Training College Hall, Auckland. Priya Gopal gave lecture demonstration on Manipuri dance, whereas Lakshman gave demonstration on drum and Tambourine. Some additional items in Auckland was *Sori Haiba*(Sword dance) and *Undro Meipham* (Whirling of fire stick) (*The Auckland Star, and H. Dwija Sekhar Sharma, 1951:1150*). Although the team tried to go to England, due to unavailability of sponsors they came to Japan in March 1952. Most of the Japanese people were aware of the Manipuri culture as during the 2nd World War, as many as 30,000 of the Japanese

soldiers out of a total 50,000 forces who entered Manipur- Nagaland sector perished due to unavailability of food and infection from tropical diseases. The team arrived at Osaka by Australian Oriental Lineship and stayed at Hikari Hotel. On May 20, the two Manipuri dancers presented with great artistry and grace, the *Khamba dance*, *Basanta Nritya* and *Nada-Mala* at the Club Hall of the Dai Maru Department store, Osaka (14). On 7th June another performance of Manipuri dance was presented at Chuo Club, Tokyo (*Nippon Times*, 1952).

Under the auspices of the Japanese Dance Artiste Association the team presented Manipuri dance items at Imperial theatre on 13th July 1952 and the 'Manichi' reported that the dances were a powerful " Stimulus to their native artiste" (*Takeshi Khinose, July 29, issue*). In between, performances were also staged at Sembashi Embujo, on 25, 26 & 27 July 1952 (*Nippon Times, dated 23.7.1952 & Japan News 24.7.52*). In Japan many of the Indian business men requested Priya Gopal and Lakshman to stay back at Japan. However, Lightfoot did not agree with the proposal. Subsequently Priya Gopal and Lakshman continued to stay at Japan for another 12 months teaching Manipuri dance to a number of Japanese students, with the assistance of Mr. M.R. Murthy, an Indian businessman based at Tokyo. During those days Priya Gopal developed a ballet script on *Mongyamba and Heloi* based on the ancient Moirang mythology and trained about 30 young Japanese students for a performance. The performance was finally staged at Sembashi Embujo. By the middle of 1953, Priya Gopal moved to the United States whereas Lakshman Singh continued to stay at Japan training the Japanese dance students in Indian Instrumental music as well as Manipuri dance. Lakshman Singh returned to Manipur in the foil of 1953. Meanwhile, Priya Gopal, on his way to the United States via Canada gave a performance at Vancouver (*The Vancouver, Monday Nov. 9.1953.*), where he had given lecture demonstration on the basic hand and body movement of Manipuri dance. In the United States the lady impresario met him once again and along with Shivaram planned to give performance in some of the established cultural institutions. On 31st January 1954, sponsored by the New school for Social Research, New York, Priya Gopal and Shivaram under the artistic direction of Louise Lightfoot performed items of Manipuri dance and Kathakali. Immediately after that, due to a prior engagements, Lightfoot returned to Australia, whereas Priya Gopal continued to stay at the United States teaching students on different aspects of Manipuri dance. In June 1955 (14-19) and again in November (1 to 30), 1955, Priya Gopal presented performance on *Kamsa, Krishna Bhangi, Shiva Sanghar*, and demonstrations on the rhythm and techniques of Manipuri hand and body movements (*New York Times, 23rd Oct. 1955*). Lightfoot again visited Manipur in January 1957 and as was in the earlier case, she became a guest at the residence of Gourmani Singh at Elangbam Leikai. This visit was used by the Impresario to collect data and write a field based study on the dances of Manipur. Over a period of 2-3 months, she visited many places in the valley particularly on the occasion of Lai Haraoba or other rituals like Potyengba (6 day ceremony of a new born child), Luhongba (Marriage ceremony), Yum-Shangaba (House warming ceremony) etc. She also interacted with a good number of learned Pundits well versed in the *Meitei Puyas, Maibas and Maibis* (Priest and Priestess.) who conducted the Lai Haraoba festival etc. All these field experiences for 3-4 months provided the necessary data and information for her book entitled the " Ritual dances of Manipur ". Simultaneously, Lightfoot was on the lookout for a talented women dancer for a second visit to Australia. She met a young talented girl of 18 years Kshetrimayum Ibetombi Devi, a distant relative of her host. Lightfoot and Ibetombi left for Australia in March - April 1957. Both the impresario and the artists gave performances across 65 cities in Australia including the Tasmanian region on items such as *Thabal Chongba*, (Moon light dance), *Cholom* (Drum and Symbol dance), *Krishna Avishar, Leima Jagoi etc.* The tour was occasionally tied up with the Kathakali dancer Shivaram of Kalamandalam. Lightfoot and Ibetombi visited Indonesia on their way back. While giving performances Ibetombi learned the Balinese dance from Mr. Kushumo Mitro. The team returned to Manipur in the early part of 1958. In Imphal, Lightfoot finalized the draft of her book entitled 'Ritual Dances of Manipur'. The book consisting of nine short chapters stretching over 79 pages is an analysis of rites, rituals and dances of Manipur viewed against the historical background particularly the process of Brahmanization of the Meitei people, ancient myths and legends of the creation story from the perspective of a modern choreographer who has a real concern and love for a relatively small community, with tremendous potentiality for dance, music and body movements. The authors central thrust is on the *Laiharaoba rituals of the Meitei* people. There are altogether 364 lais across the valley. After an intensive analysis and observation Lightfoot considered the different categories and forms of dance incorporated in the *Lai Haraoba* as well choreographed body movements. Her discussions of the rituals particularly *Lai Loukhatpa* (Spirit bringing up dance) *Leishemba Jagoi* (Creation dance), *Laiphou Jagaoi* (formation of child in the womb dance) etc were argued to be 'gestures....extremely simple and very elementary but it is artistically executed'. She further argued that *Lai Haraoba* also enacted the creation story particularly the episode of Guru Shidaba's two son contesting for the throne in the *Augri Hungel Chongba dance*. The seven 'Lai Nuras' are shown to have protected Pakhangba from his opponents. According to her, the dances of the Maibas and Maibis around four poles also symbolize the tracing out of the design of the snake, the symbol of Pakhangba. The *Lai Haraoba* ritual concludes with the episode of *Lai Nupi Thiba* (Seaching for a bride) and *lai Kangjei* (Polo) which were the Pantomines depicting the happiness and pleasure of the Lais.

V. CONCLUSION

Once in Australia Lightfoot continued to work for the promotion of Indian dances. In 1960, she released her recordings of the music and rituals of Manipur as '*Ritual music of Manipur*' under the auspices of the American Folkway Series. In Manipur R.K. Priya Gopal Sana became the Principal of J.N. Manipuri Dance Academy in 1972 and he was instrumental in the production of 3 famous ballet ie. *Bhagyachandra*, *Cheitanya Mahaprabhu* and *Nongpok Panthoibi* - all historical ballets. Laishram Laksham Singh also established his institution of dance ie. Manipur Sangeet Mahavidyalaya. As on today, all the three maestros have passed away except ,Ksh. Ibetombi Devi. After serving as a teacher of Manipuri dance for 30 years in Vanasthali Vidyapith, Rajasthan she is presently leading a retired life.

REFERENCES

- [1] Mary Louise Lightfoot and Marian Quartly - Australian dictionary of biography (Supplementary Volume, 2005).ibid.ibid.
- [2] Louise Lightfoot, Dance Rituals of Manipur (Hongkong) 1958, P. 24.
- [3] R.K. Dani Sana, R.K. Priya Gopal Sana as Cultural Beacon in H. Dwija Sekhar (edited), The other Manipur, (Delhi -2013) Vol .6, P. 1143.
- [4] H. Dwija Sekhar edited ibid.
- [5] Adelaide Mail, August 1951.
- [6] The Sunday Herald, 13th September, 1951.
- [7] The Walkato Times (Hamilton) Oct. 16* 1951.
- [8] The Auckland Star, Nov 1951 see also H. Dwija Sekhar Sharma, Opcit, P.1150.
- [9] Pavl Repts, Nippon Times, June 11,1952.
- [10] Takeshi Khinose, The Manichi, July 29, issue.
- [11] Nippon Times, dated 23.7.1952 & Japan News 24.7.52.
- [12] The Vancouver, Monday Nov. 9.1953.
- [13] New York Times, 23rd Oct. 1955.

IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science (IOSR-JHSS) is UGC approved Journal with Sl. No. 5070, Journal no. 49323.

Dr. R.K. Tamphasana. "Aspects On Louise Lightfoot's Attempt To Popularise Manipuri Dance In Australia, New Zeland And Japan (1938-1958)." IOSR Journal Of Humanities And Social Science (IOSR-JHSS) 22.8 (2017): 45-48.