



Due to Jackson Pollock's drip style of painting he was dubbed 'Jack the Dripper' by *Time* magazine in 1956

50 YEARS AGO IN
DECCAN
Chronicle

3 lockers belonging to celebs couldn't be opened

Bombay: None of the three sealed lockers of city bank belonging to cinema stars could be opened today.

The Directorate of Enforcement, Ministry of Finance, said that the delay were due to some technical difficulties. They hoped to open the lockers within the next day or two.

Two of the lockers belong to actress Mala Sinha and the third to the screen heroine Vyjayanthimala. —UNI

Image of god in locker

Madras: An image of Vigneswara and cash of Rs 3,000 were found in a local bank locker belonging to Mrs. Yadugiri Devi, grandmother of cinema actress Vyjayanthimala. Mr. P.V. Krishnamoorthy, Assistant Director, Enforcement Directorate, opened the locker later this afternoon in the presence of a representative of Mrs. Yadugiri Devi and a few other witnesses.

Mrs. Yadugiri Devi did not arrive from Bombay today as expected. This locker was sealed following the raids of the residences of cinema actors and actresses and opening of their lockers in Bombay early this week. —UNI

The abstract in modern Indian art



Alka
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artscope

Indian Abstracts — An Absence of Form brings together for the first time a vast body of work spanning a vast range of styles that have evolved in modern Indian art

There is an Urdu word that one seldom hears now but people from my parents' generation still use to great impact and to many like us it is the highest form of genuinely heartening and warm praise. It is an encompassing word that acknowledges the magnitude of effort that went into anything and the positive result that emerged from the effort. The word is "shahbashi". A close enough translation is kudos, but it lacks the grace and elegance of shahbashi.

When I saw the ongoing show and the book that accompanies *Indian Abstracts — An Absence of Form* by the Delhi Art Gallery, *Wah! Shahbashi!* is the only phrase I can think of to describe it. It is a magnificent show with a beautiful publication. The invite describes it as a "seminal exhibition charting the development of abstraction in modern Indian art, featuring close to 70 premier Indian abstract artists." It is all this and more. The exhibition brings together for the first time a vast body of work spanning a vast range of styles that have evolved in modern Indian art. The retrospective is an investigation into the evolution of abstraction in Indian art from the early 1950s till current times. Part of a



A painting by S.H. Raza and A. Chandra

continued series, it is an attempt to continue to document the richly diverse and many less understood aspects of modern Indian art. Featuring 350 works by significant practitioners of Indian abstraction, it explores the eventual and unique journey of abstraction in modern Indian art. Indian abstract artists drew on a range of influences in their work — Western abstract art, in particular the works of artists such as Klee, Rothko, Pollock or Calder, East-Asian influences, and significantly, a range of traditional tribal, folk and tantric art — for their techniques, themes and approaches.

The exhibition features prominent and significant Indian abstractionists recognised for the maturity of their imagery — such as V.S. Gaitonde, S.H. Raza, Ram Kumar, Sohan Qadri (my personal favourite),

Shanti Dave, Ganesh Haloi, Krishna Reddy, J. Swaminathan and Shobha Broto. Additionally, it also brings together lesser-known abstract works of artists that are known for their fidelity to figurative or representative art — these feature artists such as M.F. Husain, Somnath Hore, Dharamnarayan Dasgupta, Benode Behari Mukherjee, Satish Gujral and Bikash Bhattacharjee — their abstract works are enchanting and add appreciably to our understanding of Indian modernism's journey. The interplay of thought with balanced and wonderfully refined aesthetics and colours is absolutely delightful. It is a show that filled up my senses in every which way like a million *pranayams*!

An over 400-page, substantial volume features colour plates of artworks and thought-provoking essays examine and



explore the journey of the abstract in Indian art. Not surprisingly there are only seven or eight women abstract artists who are featured in the show. The fact remains that abstraction per se is an area where not many women have been able to make a mark because as any psychologist will tell you that to understand abstract concepts, requires the brain to be wired differently. And most women artists whose life is more often than not mired in the mundane are unable to unshackle themselves to think beyond the obvious. Yet it is an important voice and needs to be heard especially since it is so rare as far as practicing abstract artists go.

The few other abstract artists I would like to see in subsequent shows and tones would be Niren Gungupta (who despite being known for his figurative depictions, has done

some noteworthy abstract works of late), Shridhar Iyer, Manisha Gawade, Saba Hasan, Nupur Kundu and Harsha Swaminathan. The work of all these artists is significant and has deep maturity and an instinctive understanding of abstraction. I will be dishonest if I don't admit that I would love to see my work too in a subsequent tome like this. At the risk of sounding narcissistic, I would add my name to this list not because I like my own work, but it must be seen in the context and historical perspective of the work of someone who has seen, created and experienced art across the board from a vantage point for over 35 years, as a rare combination of an art writer, curator and artist. Besides, it is a glass ceiling that I am convinced needs to be broken.

It is my conviction that it is not possible to hide in

the arts for art is a wonderfully mathematical equation made up of 98 per cent riyaz or practice to have complete control over the idiom, one per cent inspiration and one percent genius. It is the last two per cent which is the critical crystallisation feather touch that tilts the balance to make an artist "great". Since most artists are unable to reach first component of 98 per cent, usually fledging at 40 to 50 per cent, great is a long way off.

After all, art shows, like performing arts, "live" in the mind's eye of those who "experienced" it like one can recall a brilliant piece of music or dance seen years ago, but books live longer and remain like living history inspiring generations to come.

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Manipur — The land of 1,000 dances

Copyright
Conundrum

Sharon

other weapons are also used. Thang-ta can be prac-

Quasar Thakore



Sharon Lowen

dance without frontiers

Amazing may not be the first word that comes to mind when you think of Manipuri. For many, the iconic floating costumes of the Ras-Leela, arms waving over bobbing skirts, are both a charming image and the beginning and end of what is known about this amazing classical dance tradition of India; or rather traditions, as Manipuri dance actually comprises not one but five forms of dance with Ras-Leela simply being the best known outside of the state.

My entre to discovering the incredible depth and richness of this lesser known performing art of northeast India began, with a 2x2 inch notice on a University of Michigan dance board announcing the availability of Manipuri Dance classes at the local community centre. That was in 1969 and I had never seen a Manipuri dance performance live or on film, only photographs in dance books and I knew that it was one of the four dance genres recognised as classical at the time of India's Independence. My first teacher, Minati Basu Roy, a senior disciple of Guru Atomba Singh whom Tagore brought to Santmektan in the 1920s, inspired my desire to come to India to learn more of this lyrical form. I was fortunate to realise this dream through seven years of training under Guru Singhajit Singh and in Manipuri studying Maibi jagoi with Ranjani Maibi and Kumar Maibi, Kartal Chohom with guru Thongjan Ghaoba Singh and classical Ras-Leela jagoi at the JNU Manipur Akademi.

Manipuri remains surprisingly misunderstood even by dance cognizati, writers and artists of other genres, let alone the general public today. The *satvik*, internalised *abhinaya* for which others value as the aim of their art, is the core of the Ras tradition; yet there are those from other traditions who believe that there is no *abhinaya* in Manipuri. There are five principal Ras dances; of which four are linked with specific seasons, while the fifth can be presented at

any time of the year. While outside of Manipur we see small slices of a Ras on the stage, at home the emotional and spiritual import is huge. Every parent would love to be able to afford to co-sponsor a performance as their child would be trained to become Krishna or Radha for the event. Viewers will lie prostrate before the child, as they are the deity for the time being with professionals dancing as Gopis. Every traditional home has a large open space for such performances, which are performed in the round for the community. During the *Bhangli Pareng*, a pure dance piece of intricate rhythms and patterns, no one in the audience can leave, as this is sacred. You have to get your cup of tea earlier or wait till it's over!

Besides a few folk dances, Manipuri dances are devotional in a society that is deeply religious. Manipuri dance is sustained by its society; it is still part of religion, an unbroken religious practice, rather than a revival or reconstruction or neo-classical tradition. Because of this, artists from Manipur are reluctant to come out for more than brief tours and few have been willing to live in other regions of India to foster understanding of their art.

It is truly amazing that all forms of Manipuri, or Meitei, dance play a vital living role in day-to-day culture. Despite Herculean efforts by some dancers to recreate this sense of vitality in other parts of India, with greatest continuity in Kerala. It is only in Manipur where dancers work fulltime, performing as an essential part of life celebrations. Besides Ras and the other leelas, the other main dance forms of Manipur are Lai Haroba or Entertainment of the Gods and Sankirtana.

Each stage in one's life is celebrated with *Sankirtana* performances—childbirth, *upanyanam*, marriage and *shradha* are all occasions for singing and dancing in Manipur. The Sankirtana of Manipur is unique as dance was added to Vaishnava singing of Sankirtana when it was added to the Hindu and Pre-



Sankirtana in Manipur; Khamba Thoibi dance in Lai Haroba

Hindu spiritual dance traditions of Manipur through Bengali missionaries from the 15th century onward. What we see outside of Manipur on stage are the spectacular dancing musicians spinning in the air while playing the Manipuri *pung* mardala, or the drums of Holi, turbans flying off, after dancing and playing a very few of their 90 rhythmic cycles. *Pung* chohom borrows elements from the Manipuri martial arts *Thang Ta* and *Sarit Sarak* and also from the traditional Maibi jagoi dance. Although *Pung Chohom* is traditionally performed by men, there are women's groups that are booked solid throughout the year as part of life cycle events!

The magnificent *Pung Chohom* performances, impressive as they are, in Manipur are most often seen as part of the Nupa Pala, or Kartal Chohom, which encompasses passionate *bhakti* singing and dancing with heavy brass cymbals by a circle of dancer-musicians accompanied by a couple of *Pung Chohom* artists. The Nupa Pala acts as a prologue to the Ras Leela dances, besides an independent performance too, in connection with religious rites. Before the Sankirtana Chohom, artists lead a bridegroom from his home to that of the bride and a messenger from the wedding site at the bride's home arrives to announce, "We still have the bride, do you still have the groom?" as tradition accepts elopement if either takes off before the planned marriage. It is quite a cacophony when the groom arrives with the Sankirtana



music to compete with the brass band playing at the wedding venue! Even more amazing than the fact that dance plays an essential role in daily life in Manipur is that everyone dances! It is the norm to dance and during the festival of Lai Haroba, the dance of the shamanistic Maibi spiritual mediums will be preceded by community dancing. In a long line dance one sees women from grandmothers to small girls performing a subtle and sophisticated dance that, along with the Maibi dances, was the base for creating the classical Ras. As part of this pre-Hindu annual ritual festival, teenagers from each neighborhood of the many festivals in honor of the 360 Umanglai ancestor deities of the Manipur valley compete as teams with new choreography of the *lasya* and *tandav* dance technique to depict the story of Khamba and princess Thoibi, the hero and heroine of a legendary Moirang Romance.

The Maibi dances of the Lai Haroba are essential for the preservation of the world, or at least the world of Manipur! It is remarkable that this pre-Hindu tradition has not diminished

with the advent of Vaishnavism, which coexists comfortably side-by-side. Maibis are both women, and men dressed as women, who evidence signs of being a Maibi, often as teenagers who have seizures that are not explained as epilepsy by modern science and are then turned over to Maibi gurus who train them in the ritual dances of the Lai Haroba as well as managing their seizures that result in shamanistic trances that help guide the Meitei people who come to them. This kind of shamanism can be seen only in Manipur and across Southeast Asia. There is no dearth of Maibis even in this day and age and it is not something one either wishes to become or avoid if it is so. The Maibi ritual dances include the whole Meitei cosmogony from creation through the creation of man, construction of houses, weaving and other aspects of living. There is even a Maibi dance of the deity playing polo, which originated in Manipur!

Thang-ta, the martial art of Manipur, may arguably be included as a form of dance. Besides the *thang* or sword, and *ta* or spear, shields and spears and

other weapons are also used. Thang-ta can be practised as ritual, demonstration or combat. The first way is related to the tantric practices and is entirely ritualistic in nature. Demonstrations can be converted into actual fighting practices and combat application. Thang-ta is closely related to certain war-dances like *thangkairol* (sword dance) and *khosarol* (spear dance). Many ritualistic dances in Manipur were traditionally performed by martial artists such as the spear dance for funerals or the sacred *then-gou* dance. The first time I saw the spire dance was shortly after the end of the war in Vietnam and I was struck by the technique of stepping forward after first swiveling the foot in front before stepping, which was clearly the wise way to move through knee-high paddy fields that might have hidden stakes throughout, as was the traditional practice used by the Vietcong.

The internationally acclaimed theatre of the brilliant director Rattan Thiyam, and other fine Manipuri theatre groups, is supported by actors, who have learned dance as part of their cultural ethos. Being part of a society that dances has given a foundation on which to build upon an incredibly evocative physical theatre. Manipuri dances use the entire body for expression, comparable to western dance traditions but with different aesthetics. Manipuri is a land without stone for temples of sculpted figures. The dance is never static, never stopping in frozen poses, but rather subtle and elegant transitions of circles, curves and figure eights. The ankle bells of many Indian classical forms that clearly delineate rhythms through foot contact cannot be used in Manipuri where the subtly of rhythms are syncretized and the off beats may be demarcated by a bend of the knee or in the air besides by the foot. This makes it less visible to the less observant eye, but the reward of closer attention will reveal a world of ethereal nuance.

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Quasar Thakore Padamsee
Dramatique

This week a show at Bangalore's Jagriti theatre was cancelled because the producers were unable to procure the rights for the play from the playwright's representatives. It was a sad event for the group (who have been granted rights in the past), the venue and the audience who were keen to see the performances. The issue was a result of a ridiculous miscommunication between which organisation actually held the rights.

Applying for copyright from the authors and their agents is a relatively new phenomenon. Partly because no one knew it was the 'done' thing, partly because no one could afford it, and mainly because for the western world, India didn't exist. One of the results of being a 'world player' is that India is no longer as remote from the West as it was. People, thanks to the Internet, are now clued in to what is going on in India and on its stages.

Traditionally in India theatre copyright has not been an issue. Most writers were either commissioned to create the piece, or overjoyed that someone wanted to give life to their plays. Also most playwrights, frustrated by their scripts gathering dust, would often produce the plays themselves, so the question of copyright never arose. Also Indian playwrights are aware of the poor economics of Indian theatre, and therefore understand if a royalty cannot be paid.

This, however, is slowly changing. Theatre in India is booming. Particularly for indigenously created content. More scripts are being written, more plays are being produced, and more groups are being formed. Suddenly a play might have multiple productions of it in the same decade. Recently, *The President is Coming*, a show that ran in Bombay from 2007 to 2013, has been remounted by a troupe in Chennai. Delhi University troupes make regular requests to writ-

ers whose plays have just finished a run, and even some that are still running. Barely has Manav Kaul let the ink dry on his latest work when someone from DU wants to stage it.

The way this trend is continuing, it won't be long before Indian writers have agents who negotiate royalties and fees for their clients. Personally, I am not looking forward to it. There is a certain joy when requesting rights for performance when corresponding directly with a writer. Explaining the production, and gaining understanding about the text. When dealing with an agent, that relationship becomes about paperwork and lacks warmth.

The danger is that the 'rights' argument might become quite absurd; like in the music business where singers/songwriters have to purchase rights to sing their own songs at their own concerts.

In the case of playwrights, the storyline becomes proprietary, so if it changes medium, then the ownership of plot changes to the publishers; so although a story may be a play first, then a movie and finally a novel, the producing house of the play must pay royalties to the publishing house of the novel, completely bypassing what the playwright might wish.

Royalties to writers is a concept that is well overdue. Only if our writers are respected for their work, will they continue to churn out their next play. Unfortunately, no playwrights in India have made comfortable livings that could be compared to their Western counterparts like Harold Pinter or Tom Stoppard. But, as we blindly follow systems from the west, let's hopefully pick a method of deciding royalties that is commensurate with our own theatre practice, otherwise producers will be forced to return to the copyright free works of William Shakespeare, the Ramayana and Mahabharata.