

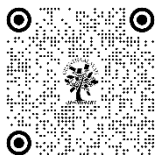


# DANCE AS MIRROR OF SOCIAL AND CULTURAL CHANGE: A PEEK INTO MANIPURI PERFORMANCE HISTORY

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## ABSTRACT

The paper attempts to highlight significant moments in the history of Manipuri dance and their implications on the dynamics of social and cultural developments of the time. The dancing body is now no longer a simple reproduction of historically created style of human movement that seem to continue forever as symbol of people's tradition and culture. The dancer's body is now read as sign, as discourse, as platform for human experience and the structure and formulations of movements in time in the body do inform particular thoughts, ideas, emotions and affects that were involved in the creation of a language of dance. By analyzing the kind of dance produced in creative people's history, we shall be able to provide hints on the structure of power, knowledge and the world views of the society of the times. No doubt technology, utilization of resources, spiritual and religious influences and power exercise do impact on social and cultural change. But the kind of dance style also do inform on the very nature of the creative inputs of society that had been necessitated in the production of the dance. Reading dance can also be as pleasurable as reading literature.

We shall study the pre - Haraoba, the Lai Haraoba dance and its transformation into the 18 th century classical dance of the Raas Leela during the conversion of the Manipuris into Hinduism. The introduction of colonial money economy and structural changes in the society and culture and its impact on dance shall be explored. Globalization and its impact on dance traditions shall also be indicated. As we go deeper into the semantic field in the structure and form of dance, operas and performance in different stages of history, we are able to discover the manifold transformation in the realm of peoples' and rulers' ideas on life, relationships and processes in response to the challenges of the time. The challenges no doubt come sometimes from outside of the realm in which the people thrive. Foreign conquests and introduction of new ways of life and action also impinges on the traditional equilibrium in society. There are times of turmoil and unease. Livelihood and art are in moments of crisis. But the response to the crises is unique, as the culture of the time indicates the resilience of that society in culture. Manipuri dance history relates this experience.

**Keywords:** Body in Literature and the Arts, Dance, The Haraoba Ethno Philosophy, Vaishnavism, Raas Leela, Colonialism, Livelihood Crisis, Globalization and Identity

## 1. INTRODUCTION: LITERATURE AND DANCE

Literature, considered to be a precious art form through a body of written words, had assumed deeper and deeper significance in its relationship and engagement with society now-a-days. For the western countries, in fact the case for engaged literature had produced some of the finest debates since the twentieth century on the necessity of the novel to be considered as an instrument of social action [Paul \(1945\)](#). Literature, whatever form it is, cannot possibly be divorced from its image as mirror of societies in flux.

What about dance? Dance, which had been a fundamental property of the human world, an expression of the creative energy of men and women since immemorial times do have qualities akin to that of literature! Dance theorists of the world owe it to one great poet of France, Stephane Mallarme (1842 – 1898) who wrote about dance as the poetry of the body! Mallarme, a great thinker, poet and critic of the arts, who was simply disappointed with the 19th century dance activities as not living up to the ideal of a divine, which he found in poetry was exceedingly satisfied when he saw a solo dance program of Ms. Lois Fuller in Paris in 1893. He was full of praise for her art, her musical embodiment, entwined in swirling materials shimmering in the ray of light, as that of an enchantress, engaged uniquely in mystical sorcery. He described her dance as 'Le for metheatrale de poisie par excellence' [Shaw \(1988\)](#). Two aspects of dance he discovered were that dance was a rite, and a superlative theatrical form of poetry. The ritual character of dance and its character as a writing, as a system of theatrical signs was contribution to the new discourse of dance as art.

In his critical writings on the ballet, he stated explicitly that the dancer is a metaphysical figure - and that she writes, and that dance writing is different from writing in a literal sense, more economical than prose. It is corporeal and not actually written. The dancer's texts is thus, he suggests, a poem that paradoxically is never inscribed – that is fixed or permanently recorded as is the poem on the page. [Shaw \(1988\)](#)

Mallarme also feels that if the ballerina writes like a poet, it is because her steps are generally 'emblematic', not 'mimetic'. For her dance is not mime. The ballerina's dance was thus like a hieroglyph, not because its symbols are iconic (that is forged in the image of real concrete objects, but rather because the pictorial writing (like that of musical score, has a mysterious and sacred quality and is difficult to decipher).

In the words of Gabrielle Brandstetter 'Dance is therefore a manifestation of the white page of movement. George Rodenbach wrote, in reference to Mallarme's poetics, that dance – as the epitome of pure suggestion – gives birth in ephemeral play of its signs – in the perfect text of a vivid, colourful, rhythmic poem drawn in the empty space, translated into the medium of the body, just as into the white page of the endlessly evolving text of dance, plastic poem of colours, rhythms, where in the body is nothing more than a blank page upon which the poem is about to be written'. [Brandstetter \(2015\)](#).

## **2. TOWARDS A METAPHYSICS OF MANIPURI DANCE**

Dance studies in Manipur, the writer would confess, is in a critical state of anomie, incapable of participating in the global process of critical issues of dealing with existence and basic principles of truth and knowledge. Our ancestors had left us a sterling tradition of dances developed some two millennia of history. Our dance experts today are quite content with what we are now without contact with global discourses and theories of dance, its relationship with society and culture. Mallarme had spoken about a spirituality and sanctity of a dancer, an outreach to a divine, metaphysical figure. How much depth of knowledge, how enlightened are we with the authenticity and integrity of our precious tradition? How much of weight are we bearing in our mind about the millennia of experience embodied in our consciousness and memory? Do we know the truth of our culture's history? In fact, do we know of our own history or have we really changed? What are the basic ingredients of behaviour, practice and values that indicate that we are with our tradition? Or have we really come to grips with the seeming dichotomy between

tradition and modernity? What about the identity of the Manipuri dance within the complex dynamics of social and cultural changes of the contemporary world? How do we analyze our dance to reflect these complexities?

### 3. MANIPUR DANCE HISTORY AND PROCESSES OF SOCIAL AND CULTURAL CHANGE

The focus of this paper with all humility is in the exploration of certain features of our dance historiography and to reflect the status of our society and culture at particular stages in the transformative periods of our expressive arts. It is an attempt to understand the extent of our civilization growth by its reflection on the character and content of our dance practices. This is also not to emphasize the role of dance as an instrument of social action to effect efficacious changes in our lives, as is done by engaged literature, but simply to define, by analyzing the philosophies and worldviews of our dance producers, why they produced the forms of dance, for what purpose, for what reasons at that particular time of social and cultural history? Certain important periods had produced indeed unique prototypes and dances, music or operas that indicate peculiar energies of that society and culture, by the way.

**Figure 1**



**Figure 1** Lai-Haraoba

Many books both indigenous and non-indigenous have come about to describe the form of the structure of the Lai - Haraoba. But before the Haraoba assumed this form, shape and size as is seen today, a number of local, sacred writings also indicated certain practices and activities which we may term the pre-Haraoba rituals, which provided interesting insight into the potential future emergence of the Haraoba rites. Dances, plays, spirit mediums, oracles, collective antiphonal, rhythmic exhortative chants, songs and physical activities which emphasized the health of the female population in order to generate birth and biological reproduction. Some of the songs and chants of the past were still incorporated as precious 'Lairon' or language of the Gods and are now pieces of sacred wisdom incorporated and preserved into the current corpus of the Lai Haraoba songs.

The Leithak Leikharol puya, a sacred book of the 18th century described a series of male female exchanges amongst the deities in the act of the creation of the universe. After laborious narratives of the creation of the universe through the action of the three creator deities and their counterparts in the Meitei pantheon and with the emergence of the female goddesses, there were scenes of collective play, bathing in the ponds and rivers, adornments of the bodies with flowers and change to different attires and then mutual plays of romance, love and sex, at different spaces in the selective glades, as well as certain chosen outhouses or courtyards where the male and female goddesses inter-acted. The act of joyous celebration of the Gods and Goddesses were affected in the collective act of Leitemba, the processing of the finishing touch to the making of the earth, after a long effort in the act of creation. The physical effort of use of limbs, the sweat of muscle, the heat in the bodies, the symbolic imagery of piercing the earth with the plough, serpentine in form and many other such imagic performances were sung and danced out spontaneously. The art of Paosa, exchange of anti-phonical songs in pleasure, and worldly wisdom, the need for preservation of the vital fluid were symbolically implicated in the song and play acts.

Here we must be careful to note that there was still not yet, a proper construction of a collective ritual, a secure structure and form as we now see in the still surviving Haraobas. All these descriptions were free flowing and non-sequencing activities between the youth Gods and Goddesses, who sang and chanted rhythmic riddles, danced about, chased each other, laughed in abandon and played. The physical actions included mutual intervention to separate (Khaamnaba), gesture of protection (Ngakpa), running away of the females from the failure of the separating act (Khaamba ngamdaduna chenkhiba), chasing them by the youth gods (Lai pakhang na tannakhiba) and played with fond wrestling acts (Lakna phana sannakhiba) and the space of the game was named Wangol Umang (the Wangolhuman settlement). [Hemchandra \(2010\)](#), P. 77 – 93

Many other places of pleasure were named, the act of bathing, the décor of flowers in the ear, the dressing of new clothes, then the holding of arms and forming of lines and the male gods pleading to the females to their self-preserved homes (eigeeekolda, eigeeekolda) and the female goddesses consenting and entering, such actions were mentioned with exultance praise and respect by the poet writers. The questions, the answers, the pleasant exchanges, the wisdom riddles with a plethora of collective vows and promises, games of words, mono-syllabic chants (chomo! chomo! Sangtekarenga!). Still undeciphered vocabularies are now ensconced with a veil of secrecy (Atthuppa) in the preciously structured theatrical ritual of the Lai-Haraoba. The Lairon literature as it was termed, if properly translated would provide more authentic information on our ancient society's religion and culture.

In primordial times, probably after the descent from the mountains and settling in the valley amidst banks of rivers and lakes, simultaneously with the formation of a planters economy passing from early vegiculture into agriculture, we possibly remember the words of Wilhem Dupre 'When we compare the religion of primitive hunters and gatherers with that of primitive planters is generally marked by a sort of increasing complexification'. [Dupre \(1974\)](#). P. 78. As Lokendra Arambam wrote, in his book, 'With the advent of the planter's economy and accentuation of shifting agriculture economy (Paamlou), in the late Neolithic of the second half of the second millennium B.C.E. (According to archeologist O. Kumar Singh), the world of the proto-Meiteis were full of developments. Major influences of fertility cults, development of ritual, ancestor gods and goddesses, were to become the feature of the proto-Meitei religion during the next thousand years or so. The universal

concept of the mother goddess would be featured, with the prior advent of the belief in the Sky god as father and the Earth as mother. A concept which was shared by the proto-Meitei with the Chakpa-s and many other tribes of South-East Asia. 'Korounongna eepanee, malemleima na eemanee' (the Sky is the father and the virgin Earth is the mother) is the general saying. [Arambam \(1996\)](#). P 392 – 393

'Vegetation and fertility cults are simply rites concerned with the origin, growth, decay, death and regeneration of created life.... The ceremonies by which hunters secure abundant supply of game being in the realm of religious experience is identical with that of the sowing ceremonies in agriculture, through the totality of religious life, for the fecundity of nature (plants, animals) is but an epiphany of sacred power of life present in everything existing, they constitute a micro cosmic participation in the life of the cosmos, ceaselessly regenerating itself. (Encyclopaedia.com)

Again, 'since religion is intimately connected with the essential situation of man in the cosmos, the central place of fertility and vegetation cults ought not to cause surprise, for they deal with the mystery of life itself; mortality and regeneration, the solidarity between all levels of existence, the necessity to kill in order to live or preserve life. The cultures and civilizations of agrarian societies are really permeated with this sort of weltanschauung that has been cosmology; the same divine rhythm that governs the universe governs and determines also human life, thus bringing into harmony with reality. Through integration into the unity of existence this rhythm forcefully present to man in the constant renewal of vegetation, the process of birth and rebirth in nature, the cycle of human fertility is connected with the great cosmic heirophanies (interpreting sacred mysteries) each one them commanding its own rites' (Encyclopaedia.com).

Cultic practices of fertility, development of philosophies of Sky father and Earth mother as male and female principles (Yang and yin) and ancestor worship (Pakhangba cult), combined together to produce the ethno-philosophy of Meitei religion in the later ages of Meitei polity formation, probably since the Cristian era till the seventeenth century, before the conversion into Hinduism. The Lai-Haraoba, which was believed to have begun from the Koubru hills down to the foothills of the Nongmaiching ranges in the era of the goddesses Panthoibi (a few years before Christ?), must have passed into different phases from jhum farming into settled agriculture and intensification of Meitei social and political structures in this historical periods the Lai-Haraoba rituals were believed to have ended somewhere after the end of Long Khonba (gathering up of souls) episodes. These were later expanded and elongated with new ritual performances being added on as continuum by succeeding kings of the Ningthouja dynasty. Great reformer kings Naothingkhong (663 – 763 A.D), Loiyumba (1074-1122 A.D.) and MeidinguKhagemba (1597-1652 A.D.) were learnt to have provided substantial innovations in Manipuri socio-economic and religio-political life. Saroj Nalini Parratt, one of the finest female scholars of Manipur who probed the Lai-Haraoba wrote about the Amaibi's (spirit medium) exhortation to the crowd in the Long Khonba episode 'Ho you servants of the sovereign god, sovereign goddess, in the dancing and rejoicing at the courtyard of the gods, now as it draws to a close, let us gather in the five souls and six with the shadow, towards the shrine of the gods. The soul will not be lifeless, the shadow will not be empty...

How you servants of the sovereign god, you servants of the sovereign goddess, at the courtyard of the god, with the basket that is made from bamboo, which gathers up all that is precious and which gathers no weeds; the chief of the baskets which is held in the hand and into which one draws fish with the feet; all that is bad and evil

for this reason, all diseases like cataracts, cholera, evil for this reason, all diseases of pigs and animals, all these let us drive away to the south...

Omniscient Lord of the navel of the universe, sovereign goddess, the Haraoba at which you were present, having been persuaded to come out into the courtyard of the shrine by the Maibi, this Haraoba is now finished. We beseech you, return to you abode in the shrine. Oh Lord, oh Lady, we do not gather fish (in the basket) but we gather in the five souls and six with the shadow, for both the sovereign god and sovereign goddess'. [Parratt \(1997\)](#) P. 125 – 126.

Saroj Nalini opined that the post Long Khonba rituals were later constructions and the Chong Khong or Phijang Cycle etc. were later additions to the original. 'The symbolism, with its use of words, flags and canopies, is more elaborate than Laibou and may reflect the accoutrements of ritual kingship. This suggests that this section of the Haraoba may be somewhat later than the original core and developed at a period of more elaborate royal court ritual. This would probably date it during the reign of Khagemba in the 17th century. It is possible that the Phijang cycle reflects the rituals of the Meitei (Ningthouja)Yek in particular, and may originally have had a separate existence before being incorporated into the Lai-Haraoba as we now have it. [Parratt \(1997\)](#), P. 128

Imagine the Phijang cycle, with the Amaibis quickening the tempo of their movements, the use of props as pillars into heaven, the vivid white cloth as, the expanse of the sky, the cloth ball or Phibul as aspects of male and female sexual potency ....[Parratt \(1997\)](#), P. 128. The element of play of the Phibun in the hands of the Amaibis, their bodies swirling and turning amidst the flag-poles, the sounds from their lips with the cloth-balls in their hands encouraging the hands to touch each other's' with the words 'chui-chui', a symbolic exhortation of bulls fighting each other with horns, these are great moments of bigger imaginations and applications of parts of the limbs in dancing movement. Much more dexterous movements, larger number of hand and finger gestures are the result of better use of nature's resources and development of the bodies experiences with richer imagination.

Looking at the sacred texts of the puyas to hunt for reference of dances, we are now able to unearth a host of old manuscripts (early Meitei books are still not numbered and translated!), we are able to pin point some religious writings which wrote about dance movements in the ancient past. At the story of the creation of the Manipur universe the acts of the male gods and goddesses were recorded in a book 'WukakLatha' (spread of culms of bamboo on the surface!) where the end work in the finishing processes in the making of earth was celebrated by the deities with joyous abandon. The creator god Aseeba from his body produced nine gods, and nine female goddesses as well and bid them to trample upon the surface of the earth. The male gods jumped and treaded upon the surface, while the female goddesses slided with their feet (Lai Pakhang na chongnanetle, the Lainurasshitnashitna, netle!). [Hemchandra \(2014\)](#), P. 145. In the book 'Panthoibi Khongkhul' recently published by Hem Chandra Khaba (which was published by late Moirangthem Chandra Singh in a shorter version in 1964) we are able to have a glimpse of the first possible developed Lai-Haraoba sequence in Meitei dance history. It had to do with the outstandingly written 'long poem' written by unknown poets sometime in the 17th or 18th century in praise of the goddess Panthoibi, who was believed to be the goddess of Manipuri civilization. Panthoibi was the most sung about and written about goddess in the Manipuri pantheon, and she was learnt to have performed the Haraoba rites at the Nongmaiching Hills. She must have lived in the few years before Christ who fell in love with a tribal god of the Angom clan in the hill, and the king of the Meitei, Khaba, in the central plains of the Imphal valley (Kanglei) had married

Panthoibi, but she ran away with her lover Nongpok Ningthou. There must have been a struggle and fight between Khaba and Nongpok Ningthou for possession of Panthoibi. In the book both Panthoibi and Nongpok Ningthou were recognized as deities and the Khaba and Nganba clans organized the Haraoba in memory of the deities, by establishing a shrine (of thatch and bamboo) and the gods and goddesses' symbolic images were consecrated! (KhubamYaaba).

But the sequence described by the book had no mention of the proper ritual sequences of the Lai-Haraoba we see today. The preliminary summoning up of the spirit of the Lai from amidst the water (Ikouba), the journey to the shrine (Higaba), the act of infusing life (Thawai Happa) and all such elaborate ritual sequences we are witnessing at the moment were not mentioned. What we could glimpse from the ancient ritual form in the Panthoibi age were the preliminary act of Lei-Langba (invitation to gods and human with offer of flowers), then the act of Lairemma Paosa (the exchange of erotic song acts), the Anoirol (song of the dances for the welfare of the generations), the Sharam Tangkhul and the Nurabi fights for possession rights of agricultural land and the Ougri (the oath of gods and men to effect a fecund future with chants). These five sequences were indicated in the long poem. Some of the acts of Kabok Chaiba (spread of puffed rice), which we are seeing as separate actions in the Moirang agricultural rites were also mentioned in the Panthoibi stories. The Christian era and a few centuries onwards till perhaps the 17th century were a period of extensive transformations and progressions of Meitei philosophy of life and existence. It was a period of wars, consolidations, conquests and substantial economic, social and political actions which also impacted upon the artistic and literary developments. While the separate clan and lineage were having autonomous forms of appeasement of ancestors, the social formation, incorporating clans, tribes and other communities have induced substantial developments in the structural construction and rationalization of ritual procedures till the advent of Hinduism which transformed our artistic practices.

#### **4. FROM CLAN RITUAL TO STATE RITUAL**

As we have seen in the Panthoibi contribution in the development of the Meitei – Lai-Haraoba, we must not forget that though Panthoibi was a maiden of the Nganba clan, she was also a primordial Amaibi, the spirit medium as well as highly independent woman who could defy the traditional values of Meitei agrarian society. She however as spirit medium could envisage and absorb the wisdom of the ancients, an awareness of the male cosmos and the living energy of mother earth as female principle, whose union fertilized creation. Her leading action in the Haraoba sequences, was to effect a magical power to ensure the unity of the male cosmos and the female earth, so as to produce food, plants, animals, fish and all living beings with life, that she held the veins of the earth (Leigeemaree paiba), and hold the energy of the sky (Nongemareeshuba). [Hemchandra \(2017\)](#), P. 177. This human intervention in ensuring the union of the cosmic powers of the sky with the receiving energy of the female earth so as to create life was the core belief in the fecundation rites of the Haraoba. Many of the clans in the Meitei ethnos development process nursed the mental and physical qualities of women who bore main responsibility to generate birth.

races of early matriarchal societies were visible in our social history. The division of labour induced by agriculture through the plough produced the ascent of male power in patriarchy, but retained quite long the high status of women. The care for women's health and productivity were evident in many of clan Haraobas. The 'Lammapi' is a term of the clan fertility mother, whose worship rituals were

dominated by the married women (mou) in the clan. The Leishangthem and Sarangthem lineages in their Haraoba rituals revealed some of the most genuine proto-Haraoba sequences (before the proper Haraoba came into being). Choice of days when the gods eat domestic animals and birds, the total initiative of the mous in the preparation of rice flour, for the taste of the season (Chanoutangba), the placement of the deities in an outhouse during the celebration, preparation of puffed rice for offerings to kings and other elders and families (kabokchaiba) and female priestess dancing, oracle giving and drinking of liquor and eating of animal flesh. No Anoirol, but a Kanglei Chongba, a sequence of the mous sitting on straw, and exchange of songs, the phrasing with the end word 'de', in anti-phonal manner (Awai-Akhum). The next day onwards the males of the clan (Piba) were allowed to enter, helping in the preparation of Chakngan (steamed rice), where the mous, Leishabis (virgin girls) play games imitating animal and cock behavior, like kekekrek, the kouthrembi dances (no longer heard now), and the Sharee – Litpa and Sharee – Hanba (Ougri rituals, now present) were performed by the males and females of the clan. Unique use of materials like iron tripods (Phallic indicators), plays of theatrical actions of young males imitating deer or boar as victims of hunt placed on cane baskets (Yangkok) were ritually played, women had tug of war, footraces, etc. These actions perhaps were still in vogue till the advent of the Hindu religion. Arambam (1996), P. 394 – 396. Four Meitei kings are mentioned in the Puyas as having contributed substantial inputs into the development and expansion of Meitei philosophy from the chain of wisdom teachers since the 5th century A.D. Naothingkhong (663 – 773A.D.) who learnt the philosophy and art of governance from two wisdom teachers Luwang Punshiba (Luwang the long lived), and Mangang Guru (preceptor of the Mangang clan), in whose court the Meitei script was believed to have been developed. (Khaba Hemchandra conversations, 2017). Meidingu Loiyumba (1074 – 1122 A.D.), who organized and rationalized the worship and revenue administration with proper tasks (Shinyen) for the consolidation of social structures of clans and lineages, Meidingu Khagemba (1597 – 1652) A.D.) who rationalized the study of the Meitei language and script, produced books, expanded the polity, developed economy, market systems, victorious warfare, conquered spaces and horizons of intellectual contact with foreign scholars, effected transfer of technologies with new population settlements, developed local readers and translators of foreign correspondences, and transformed the social and cultural environment of his time. A host of tantric philosophers and academics, Brahmin priests and scholars since the 15th century, Muslim war captives and Chinese architects and engineers who helped produce bricks, Keongor Phuras and humped bridges, must have through inter-actions with local creative minds to change the ways how we looked at the world. Along with the rationalization of ritual in the centre of human activity, Sanamahee and Pakhangba worship must have assimilated the art of iconography and statue making, of wax and bronze casting with the production of manuscripts along with book making similar to that of Ahom and the Chinese crafts, the philosophy of the body must have reached a certain higher experience. This just paved the path of Meitei intellectual efflorescence in the latter two centuries. One must remember that the Lord Khagembam accepted the title of Lai-Ningthou (the concept of god king or that of king as god) which was an Indian contribution to global statecraft in south and Southeast Asia. Centralization of ritual as in written law would have been envisaged at this period.

The last contributor is of course Meidingu Chinthangkhomba (1763 – 1789) who was better claimed as the practical saint philosopher who brought in a new chapter in Manipuri dance and philosophy. He was the person who effected the



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equal assimilation of Meitei religion with Vaishnav Hinduism there forming the artistic expressions into what we now know the classical art of Manipuri dance.

## 5. FROM CLASSICAL ERA OF DANCE TO UNCERTAIN MODERNITY OF GLOBALIZATION

So far in proposing an unclear picture of the development of Manipuri dance, we have a glimpse of social and cultural transformation but a thick description of Manipuri dance in a proper historical paradigm has not been possible in our research experience. More authentic and engaged in our research is called for in the future. But we are certain that the Meitei community and its dance experience had traversed a history of more than two thousand years, and we know that through both male dances and female, dances were definitely varied in their kinaesthetic language we had been focusing more in the female form as an easier model of dance research. We however need to note on the seeming continuity of as established model of the dance form without examination its structural changes due to changing dimensions of culture, society and polity. The seeming unbroken style of curvilinear and serpentine form of body movement in the dance is influenced by the mystical ancestor dragon or Pakhangba. Among the ancestor gods, the Atiya Sidaba or the Sky-god is reflected in the sacred literature as having a form of a flying serpent dragon. [Arambam \(1996\)](#). P. 304

However, the belief in the ancestor as a divine being associated with the Pakhangba cult became a philosophical and moral construct during the reign of Naothingkhong (663 – 773 A.D.). The Naothingkhong precepts run like this – ‘Meitei – there is no greater god than your great grandfather Pakhangba. He is the owner, and master of the universe. Your beliefs and practices should be that of understanding the soul, the ability to see him in his body, he who knows shame in darkness, whose dietary habits and physical practices are thorough and austere, whose house is clean and sacred, and he guards his domain silently and does not leave it, who does not hesitate to lay down his life, and he who knows his father, who knows his elders, who practices good conduct, - all these are of the self and accepted by all. He possesses then the art of understanding, the true path to knowledge, the true spirit of courage and his behavior. Forms of address, voices, character, and personality, is known, understood. The whole practice therefore leads one into the path of liberation thou shall practice the same and be liberated. Of all the gods, the immortal one is kept as a special hidden one, and he worships him worships his parents as deities. All those who are born enter into the father and preceptor, searches for the way of the ancestors, for there is no other god than the ancestors; the Guru is the father, Guru is the mother, and Guru is the soul! [Arambam \(1996\)](#), P. 301, 302.

The Pakhangba or serpent dragon motif in the Lai-Haraoba dances splurged with the ascendant of the Ningthouja dynasty in the one thousands seven hundred years of the Christian era. As this researcher wrote in her thesis ‘Amidst the ritual performances of the Lai-Haraoba there is a series of existing spirit-medium dances of sliding serpentine movements, symbolic enactment of sexual encounters of the deities beneath the cosmic umbrella, refreshing the divine union between the sky father and earth mother, along with participation of the cosmic forces encompassing and fixing of the four direction and finally the processing walk by the congregation beneath the cosmic canopy, (and without the canopy), imitating the coiled figures of the serpent – dragon father in Lai-Haraoba terminology by what is known as Paaton (Lairen Mathek by the Amaibis), Phibul Ahabi (play of cloth – balls), Chong-KhongYetpa (moving around the four placed chongs or tabards in an ‘8’ pattern by

the Amaibis, Chong-KhongLitpa (moving underneath the spread white cloth) and Lairen MathekYumjao Paphan (coils of the serpent dragon performed by the congregation). Saroj Nalini Parratt had rightly speculated that these enactments were indeed a series of future additions to the ritual system at some particular historical time when the Pakhangba worship as the supreme ancestor reached its peak. Lokendra Arambam in his unpublished thesis had also reflected on the emergence of the ancestor – worshipping clans as the major social and political power in the cultural milieu after the ascent of Nongda Lairen Pakhangba and the transformation that had taken place in the traditional world of the Meitei community, effecting changes in the structures of ritual, philosophies and world views of the people. It is true that the Lai – Haraoba structures had indeed experienced changes in its performative nature with the expansion of the Pakhangba cult. [Khangembam \(2015\)](#).

The serpent-father of the ancestor warrior had been assimilated with the sky-father earth-mother theories of the planters of the agricultural clans, it was now to recon figurate itself with another abiding and overwhelming principle, the great liberator and emancipator of mankind, the Lord Krishna as an incarnation of Supreme Lord Vishnu, the clash of these two philosophies was worked out in the tense period of war, slavery and struggle for freedom when Manipur (named in 1742 to reflect the navel in the body of the universe – Manipura) was in conflict with Burma, the conflicts of two religions since the era of Chingthangkomba's grandfather Garibniwas (1708-1748) to his grandson's time and the historic compromise by 1770s was a period of stress, violence disaster of floods, displacement and fratricidal strife. Chingthangkomba strived to affect a great civilization through love, tolerance and wisdom. The result was the RaasLeela of 1779 A.D. Through the liberation of the state from the hands of the Burmese and acceptance of Gouriya Vaishnavism in the heart of the Meiteis, the great saint monarch also changed the polity organization of Manipur, thereby changing the indic god-king concept. This time the Lord Govinda was enthroned as king of Manipur, and his servant Chingthangkomba was the arranger (Bhandar) of the divine revelation of the sacred realm, the RaasLeela was the representation of this heavenly realm.

**Figure 2**



**Figure 2** Raas Leela

When Chingthankhomba's grandfather imposed Ramandi (Rama worship) in the early decades of the 18th century, there was strong resistance by the people under the leadership of the wisdom teacher Chingoo KhongnangThaba. The monarch in the urge for personal power and expansion of the nation's empire he had to undertake violent methods of desecration of traditional temples, destruction of native idols and persecuted the common people. Native literatures were burnt. Fratricidal strife and foreign invasions followed the tumultuous fifty years or so. What the grandson attempted was to effect a compromise between the two religious philosophies, Meitei and Hindu. The Lord Govinda was equated with the ancestor god serpent-dragon god Ibudhou Pakhangba, with his symbol inscribed in the navel of the statue of the Lord Govinda. Traditional customary practices were retained amidst the new imported religious belief. Hindu temples were allowed to be built amidst the clan households with Brahmin families settled amidst the native populations to preside over the new rituals. Traditional Meitei religion and practices were allowed to be retained in the changed social milieu. The indigenous religion by itself was to continue, along with other religions of Islam and tribal religions. Vegetarianism was spread amidst the population which necessitated reforms in the rituals system.

Three important indigenous beliefs were incorporated in the construction of the Raas Leela. The basic belief structure of the appeasement of the forces of the female mother earth (Leitai) and of the Father -sky (Nongdai), the principle of the settlement of the gods and goddesses in the native land was assimilated in the consciousness in constructing movements and gestures (Khoiyum Khunthok) and the expressive vocabularies of the gestures were borrowed from the philosophy and language of the Haraoba dances (Haraolon, Khutlon and Shathek - the language of rejoicing the hand gestures and the bodies behavior), were the resources used in the construction of the ritual as well as dances). The script was however the precious Maha Bhagavata Puranas from the 29th to 33rd chapters of the 10th Canto. The songs were in Brajaboli and Sanskrit. The costumes, the imaginary dream vision of the male Lord in his appearance in the monarch's dream - a style developed in consciousness of the serpent dragon. The ladies costume - of course nature (Radha) in resplendent green and the Gopis in material ghagras to reflect Brindavan ladies of the eons, to prevent any erotic misconceptions. The ladies breasts were covered with white breast-straps (Thabak yet) and the ladies faces were covered with thin veils (Maikhum) along with Koktumbi (conical caps). These customaries were to be transformed in the next two centuries as tastes and behaviors changed. The very prototype of the ancient performance continued as pure ritual in the temple of Govindajee, facing a precarious crisis of bio-generational loss of performers, and passing away of the classical generation of the elders, other institutions and teaching institutes are facing certain problems of lack of access to modern disciplines of critical discourses as well as constant focus on the performatives alone.

The colonial era of the late 19th and early 20th centuries had also brought in cataclysmic crises in the introduction of the money economy of progressive undermining of patronage, development of competition and strife, as different from the deliberate care and concerns of the 'Feudal' monarchs of the past. The nature of patronage has been transformed beyond recognition, families not getting financial support for maintenance properly were forced to use dance too as a profession. Dance that had existed in the ritual environment was gradually taken out of its original spaces in temples, pavilion and processional events and new secular spaces were encountered (not the modern Indian proscenium directly). Deeply religious, orthodox but creative artists went out from their homes and habitat to show dances

for a living, but managed to retain the strict principles of their religious art. Others went out to seek secular spaces for entertainment, livelihood and profit. The women, who were still nursed in orthodox religious values, were lured into a new profession, that of the art of exposure of the body in dance in exchange for a living, and recognition, not by a spiritually charged audience, but a secular other human congregation with differing attitudes to the notion of the gaze. The advent of Marbaak Jagoi (the other countries dance) which emerged in the 20's led to a crisis when the women were ostracized by the educated males of society. They charged the women dancers for using Indian dance forms to titillate the factory workers, thus betraying the dignity of Manipur. They applied to the Manipur Maharajah Churachand Singh (1891 - 1941) to ban the Marbaak jagoi. The Maharajah obliged in 1935. But the women didn't bother! They entered the proscenium theatre and enriched the Manipur theatre movement. Before, female roles were played by men. Henceforth women entered the proscenium theatre movement. But orthodox Hinduism played a big role to diminish the status of women. In the early 20th century's women's education was late in Manipur.

**Figure 3**



**Figure 3** Marbaak Jagoi

## 6. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Dances however survived in the traditional rituals as well as in the Hindu religious dances, the Raas Leelas were surviving in the religious establishment of Govindajee but the 21st century saw a great loss of women participants when the elderly generation was slowly passing away. Authentic songs of the Sutras (singers in Raas) were no longer there. Globalization had effected changes beyond our recognition. Trade, commerce and industry, tourism etc. have become terms whose meanings and implications are not easily accessible to the common man. The media, television and propaganda were also focusing on dances, which lacked the discipline, rigour and integrity of the art form. Commercialization has effects which we had not been able to grapple with. Contemporary dances are indicating certain throwing away of traditionally cherished values. Conflict, rivalry and tension had disturbed the environment of culture. The question of the identity of Manipuri dances had become more and more unclear in our disturbed environment.

## 7. OBSERVATIONS

The dancing body is now no longer a simple reproduction of historically created style of human movement seems to continue forever as symbol of people's tradition and culture. The dancer's body is now read as sign, as discourse, as platform for human experience and the structure and formulations of movements in time in the body do inform particular thoughts, ideas, emotions and affects that were involved in the creation of a language of dance. By analyzing the kind of dance produced in creative people's history, we shall be able to provide hints on the structure of power, knowledge and the world views of the society of the times. No doubt technology, utilization of resources, spiritual and religious influences and power exercise do impact on social and cultural change. But the kind of dance style also do inform on the very nature of the creative inputs of society that had been necessitated in the production of the dance. Reading dance can also be as pleasurable as reading literature. As we go deeper into the semantic field in the structure and form of dance, operas and performance in different stages of history, we are able to discover the manifold transformation in the realm of peoples' and rulers' ideas on life, relationships and processes in response to the challenges of the time. The challenges no doubt come sometimes from outside of the realm in which the people thrive. Foreign conquests and introduction of new ways of life and action also impinges on the traditional equilibrium in society. There are times of turmoil and unease. Livelihood and art are in moments of crisis. But the response to the crises is unique, as the culture of the time indicates the resilience of that society in culture.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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