

## Embodied

Dance 1: Radha Abhisar from Basanta Raas

*Here comes Radha*

*gracefully like an elephant*

*she sees him while she walks*

*in the dreams when she sleeps*

*Oh! the one adorned with peacock feathers!*

In this segment called Radha Abhisar, Radha, along with other gopis, go out at night to meet their beloved Krishna and dance raas leela with him. Raas leela or jagoi raas as it is popularly known in Manipur is a ritual performance enacting the love play between Radha, Krishna and the gopis. For the Vaishnava Meitei, the performance is a ritual offering indicative in the popular usage like 'let's go and worship a raas' rather than saying 'let's go and watch a raas'. Since it is a ritual offering, the movements are minimal, facial expressions are mellowed down and made subtle. There are five kinds of jagoi raas, three of which were introduced in the eighteenth century and two were introduced in the twentieth century. What's interesting in the history of jagoi raas is that the fourth raas was introduced in the beginning of the twentieth century in 1904 by a princess called Sanatombi.

Sanatombi used to dance as the lead dancer in jagoi raas at the royal palace. After her father, the then king was dethroned after Manipur got defeated in the first Anglo-Manipuri war in 1891, Sanatombi got married to the then British Political Agent of Manipur. Sanatombi wanted to offer a raas at her new residence, but she was met with restrictions to offer the original raas that was associated with the royal temple. Then, she took the initiative to offer a new raas called the nitya raas in 1904. Changes were made in the costume. the veils that earlier covered the face was taken out, and the thabakyet (chest wrap) that acts as additional layer of cloth to cover the breasts were changed. These two earlier covered the face and the breast, two highly sexualized parts of a women's body. These were replaced by a transparent cloth. The earlier Kuktumbi costume was replaced by a new one called the Jhappa costume that includes a decorative golden headgear worn on the back of the head and a mangtika. The year of introducing Nitya raas coincided with the first women led battle against the British in 1904. Therefore, the change in costumes, the agency of

Sanatombi in introducing the new Raas has been read by various scholars as an important landmark of women empowerment and assertion of women's agency in Manipur history.

In all kinds of jagoi raas, there is a crucial segment called *bhangi pareng achouba* symbolizing the construction of an image of Krishna. *Bhangi Pareng Achouba* also serves as a link between the pre-vaishnavite and vaishnavite performance traditions of Manipur because the movements of Bhangi pareng as we see in Raas Leelas of Manipuri are all drawn from the dances of Lai Haraoba, a pre-Vaishnavite ritual.

### Dance 2: Bhangi Pareng Achouba

By the beginning of the twentieth century, the dance practitioners started moving out of the state, interacting with other dance forms. The interaction with other dance forms induced new changes and modifications in the presentation and performance of the Manipuri as a dance form. One of the pioneers of Manipuri dance, Oja Amubi was a close associate of the dancer Uday Shankar. Oja Amubi choreographed many new compositions, especially designed for solo presentations. Manipuri dance began to shift from the sacred ritual spaces to the stage proscenium. New dances were being created mostly in the late 1930s and the early 1940s. One of the early compositions of Oja Amubi is called Krishna Vandana based on the ashtapadis of the 12<sup>th</sup> century text Geet Govinda of poet Jayadeva.

What's interesting about the composition Krishna Vandana is that it uses a lot of hand gestures derived from the Natyashastra tradition. In that point in time, many scholars and dance practitioners were debating as to what constitutes the essence of Manipuri dance and what are the themes that we should be incorporating in creating new dances. Since Krishna Vandana uses certain mudras or hand gestures derived from the Natyashastra, scholars at that time were critiquing Oja Amubi for creating the dance and that it corrupts the true essence of Manipuri dance. This time was also challenging for dancers and choreographers for they attempted to bring in new improvisations and modifications to the dance form. Oja Amubi was one such guru who tried to maintain the serenity and the subtlety of expressions and minimal and restrained body movements of the form and yet bringing a new turn to the history of this dance form.

### Dance 3: Krishna Vandana

It says,

*“he rests on the breasts of Radha  
he shines like a sun  
he washes away our pain  
he is like a swan swimming among the saints  
all praise to you lord krishna”*

A disciple of guru Amubi called Guru Thingbajam Babu was also touring various places outside the state with dancers of the other forms. He felt that the compositions of Guru Amubi were still very much in the traditional format and lacked in rigor while competing with other dance forms. In Oja Babu’s opinion, Manipuri dances need to be little faster and energetic. So, he used to modify the compositions of Guru Amubi to make it what he believed to be more worthy of competing with other dance forms. This is a piece that Oja Babu re-composed from the original composition called Hari Riha based on the Geet Govinda.

It says

*“he wears Chandan  
beautiful earring, beautiful garlands  
and he plays with the beautiful gopis”*

Dance 4: Hari Riha

Today, we have composers like my own Guru, Nongthombam Amusana Devi, who learnt from the two gurus that I mentioned earlier, Oja Amubi and Oja Babu. My Guru today is creating new choreographies. But she is constantly critiqued and asked about what the essence of Manipuri dance in her new compositions is and why does she take certain liberty in improvising new movements and expressions that could possibly erode the essence of Manipuri dance. One of her new compositions is called Yeningtha, a composition that narrates the beauty of the spring season and the ecstasy it arouses in human and nature.

Dance 5: Yeningtha

Now, be it is the dances of the 1940s or the newer compositions, or the raas leela which are based on the Vaishnav philosophy, dance movements and aesthetics are rooted in the pre-Vaishnavite

ritual tradition called the Lai Haraoba. Lai Haraoba is a ritual festival dedicated to the traditional deities. And what is similar in all these performance traditions is that these performances are not merely for entertainment but constitutes a form of worship. Though the performance traditions seem different due to the different religious orientations, the movements are drawn from one another. Lai Haraoba is the root from which the Vaishnavite performances like Raas Leela are crafted. The movements of *bhangj pareng achouba* is derived from the dance movements used in Lai Haraoba. For instance, the basic pose symbolizing the image of Krishna is taken from the dance called Panthoibi Jagoi. The piece that I am going to do now is called Thougol, meaning an offering to the deity, danced for the prosperity and peace. This sense of offering the bodily movements in the form of dance runs across most of the performing traditions of Manipur.

#### Dance 6: Thougol

Our dances reflect the vibrant culture of Manipur. But what happens to the dances when we are faced with violence, loss of life and loss of hope and what will become of our dances when the dancing bodies are dying? What do we embody then? In these uncertain times, we can only dance something that embodies pain along with a strong desire to live.

#### Dance 7: Final dance