



“We Can’t Let Go”: Navigating Dance in a (Post-)Conflict Society

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Abstract

Violence and precarity in Manipur is its past and current. What becomes of dance when violence spills over to various parts of society? What does it mean to be haunted by unspeakable memories of violence and yet dance for self and community, region, and nation? The essay is written collaboratively and individually by co-authors—practitioners and researchers who have worked on exhuming the sublimated tensions and contradictions in dance cultures of Manipur (India) in the last decade. Though chronologically years apart, they find ideological connections in the demands of the peoples from their government. On the back of historical and cultural circumstances, such demands, fear, or violence arise from exclusionary processes of being minority communities within the nation. Biswas conducted her doctoral fieldwork through agitation, riots, and blockades during the Inner Line Permit (ILP) movement (2014–2016). Devi’s doctoral fieldwork began during months of COVID-19 pandemic (2020) and concluded in May 2023 as violent clashes between two ethnic communities broke out. “What will remain of our dances when we are gone?” is often asked of us during conversations with peoples; “we can’t let go” of hope or fear, they assert. The purpose of the essay is two-fold: We look back on methods, ethics, and care involved in fieldwork with interlocutors who have witnessed violence, while we witnessed violent events ourselves. Secondly, we deliberate on observance of rituals and staged performances while our interlocutors grapple with experiences of loss,

grief and trauma framed by conflict, exclusion, and an overall fraught silence to their demands. We further deliberate on what remains of dance in Manipur at a time of rising tensions and divisions.

Keywords: ethnography; everyday life; conflict; remains; rituals; Manipur; south Asia

The essay draws on the authors' doctoral fieldwork in Manipur, a small landlocked Indian state sharing its borders with Myanmar to the east, and the Indian states of Nagaland, Assam, and Mizoram to its north, west, and south, respectively. As researchers with roots in south Asian dance history, it has been heartening to see scholarship on dances of Manipur grow, and this has been vital to knowing the dances themselves and to sharing them; though largely focused on the dances of the Meitei community, previous scholarship contextualizes dance in the socio-religious-political realm of the region.¹ What we (Biswas and Devi) aim to do in this essay is peel away the infinite beauty and grace of Manipuri dances to lay bare the circumstances through which dances have been performed, created, and transmitted—intergenerationally or otherwise—to performers and audience in the past decades.

When we do so, we find violence and precarity in Manipur is its past and current. What then becomes of dance when violence spills over to various parts of society? What does it mean to be haunted by unspeakable memories of violence and yet dance for self and community, region and nation? The essay is written collaboratively and individually by co-authors who are practitioners and researchers working on exhuming the sublimated tensions and contradictions in dance cultures of Manipur in the last decade. Our research interests and lived experience in proximity to the performances we recount in this essay have also fundamentally shaped how we know, write, and do dance from this location.

1. See Manipuri" in *The Dance in India* (Faubion Bowers, 1953), *Feminism in a Traditional Society: Women of the Manipur Valley* (Manjusri Chaki-Sircar, 1984), *The Language of Hand Gestures in Manipuri Dance: semantics and politics* (Sohini Ray, 2009), *Subdued Eloquence: Poetics of body movement, time and space* (Usham Rojio, 2017), *Cultural Fusion in a Religious Dance Drama: Building the Sacred Body in the Manipuri Rāsīlās* (Rodney Sebastian, 2019), *The Celestial Dancers: Manipuri Dance on Australian Stage* (Amit Sarwal, 2022).



Figure 1: Laiphadibi traditional dolls in classical Manipuri dance costumes sold outside a dance venue.

Biswas—not a resident of Manipur—conducted her fieldwork during the agitation, riots, and blockades of the Meitei peoples' movement to implement the Inner Line Permit (ILP) system in Manipur (2014–16); the movement demanded an adaptation of "a system of controlled entry, settlement, and monitoring of non-indigenous migrants into borderland polities based on a colonial regulation" (McDuié-Ra, 2016, p. 93–94), one modeled on some of the neighboring states. ILP was implemented in Manipur in 2019. Devi's work—in the field at home—began during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. It came to a halt in the summer of 2023, when internecine conflict erupted between two communities—the majority Meiteis and the Kuki-Zo.² While the pandemic had instilled silence and an abrupt fear of death, violence made its own music, with tear gas explosions, water cannon swooshes, and shots fired from guns. Devi, like others, lived with a constant fear of harm and death, and

2. The Meitei, though a majority group in Manipur, is a historically disadvantaged group in India, as are the Kuki-Zo. In past decades, animosities and instances of ethnic strife between these two communities, and between others, have been frequent. The recent tumult was sparked by a court ruling directing the Government of Manipur to send recommendations for Meitei's inclusion in the Scheduled Tribe list, entitling them to the same economic benefits as the minority Kuki and allowing them to reinforce their political strength. Both communities are believed to be backed by militias. Furthermore, the military's presence in the state—to conduct counterinsurgency measures against crime syndicates and trafficking—is indistinguishable from the socio-political reality of Manipur. See McDuié-Ra's *Borderland State in New India* (2016) for an understanding of various kinds of violence.

she paused thinking/talking about dance, because it seemed jarring to continue to do so in the face of existential threats.

The tenacious desire for life and art continues despite arbitrary violence, however. “What will remain of our dances when we are gone?” has often been asked of us; “we can’t let go” of hope, or fear, dancers assert. Though our work in the field was chronologically years apart, we find ideological connections in the demands of the people to the state and central government, through protest marches and strikes, as well as some more forceful means to obtain redress. On the back of historical and cultural circumstances, such demands, fear, or violence arise from the exclusionary processes aimed at minority communities within the nation.

The purpose of the present essay is twofold: we look back on the methods, ethics, and care involved in fieldwork with interlocutors who grapple with experiences of loss, grief, and trauma framed by conflict and exclusion, violent events we witnessed ourselves.³ In addition, we deliberate on what remains of dance in Manipur at a time of rising tensions and divisions.

Vulnerable observer and mid-conflict fieldwork: Debanjali Biswas

When I write about dance’s entanglement with everyday life in Manipur, it means I also write about the lived domain from which dance is made. Prior to the fieldwork, except for sporadic incidents of bombing and targeted assaults on migrant/waged workers from other parts of India, everyday life in Manipur was relatively calm. Insurgency and self-determination movements that had been on the rise between the 1980s and the late 2010s were mitigated by counterinsurgency measures and accords. Hence, large-scale violence was not anticipated during the years of my fieldwork; I felt assured of personal and of participants’ safety. Demands to safeguard indigeneity and other rights continued to amplify during this period, until it erupted into widespread unrest in the summer of 2015.

3. All names have been anonymized.

There were three ways violence was manifested at the field site where I had found myself: firstly, listening to locals speak and reading firsthand and other narratives; secondly, witnessing acts of violence; and lastly, experiencing violent behaviors. The likelihood of harassment or assault varies depending on the systems of abuse, as well as the political, economic, or social instability where the fieldworker works. In Manipur, violent encounters are sometimes normalized. The abundance of narratives on violence that I have listened to, documented, and read, sensitized me and kept me anxious and alert. Besides intermittent checks of possessions and personal identity, the body too became an object of suspicion. The locals' lack of faith in men in uniform persuaded me to tread with immense caution at the sight of them. I recognised the perils of conducting open-ended fieldwork when I was observed, followed, and heckled into not inquiring about local lives. I was questioned—as an unaccompanied female, as a research scholar, as an Indian in Manipur who lived for many months in a city not her own—the interrogating party never found my presence necessary.

But how does a practitioner/scholar approach violence when multiple state and nonstate actors are involved?

Many interlocutors had highlighted some aspect of interference, extensive policing, or militarization in their lives. Performing artist Veni confided about a time when he was accosted by police while on his way by bicycle to perform outside Imphal, blindfolded with his own shirt, then made to board a four-wheeler. After hours of standing in what he claims was an open field, he understood that someone had been brought to identify him as a militant. Till the time he returned to his residence, he feared that had he been mistakenly identified as a militant, he could have been made to disappear. Since the incident, he admits to walking slowly and trailing his bicycle with him in areas in which he is relatively unknown. Atrocities, as Diana Taylor notes, are "remembered and thought of even when there are no external witnesses and no recourse to the archive" (2003, p. 204). In a similar vein, the undisclosed archive of dancers' experiences outside creating

and doing dance, is expressed through personal memory and kept away from the dance(d) archive.

It is perhaps incumbent on researchers to remark on various procedures of omission and silencing that they must comply with while knowledge is produced. The “field” of fieldwork carries with it risk as well as opportunity (Gupta and Ferguson, 1997, p. 3). Written in real time, fieldwork comprises the flow of collection of material and the intellectual challenges of processing it, including leads that were tentative, data that were incomplete, blocked access, hindrances, prejudices, and even the failure to persevere.

In *Violence: Ethnographic Encounters*, Parvis Ghassem-Fachandi examines a fieldworker’s decision to incorporate personal encounters with violence into analyses (2009, p. 4–9). The inability to extricate oneself from what one studies is fundamental, however a fieldworker continues to participate in a site with heightened physical or moral risk, even when s/he has the option to leave. Does this subjective experience of violence allow for an insight about the realities of the field? He adds, witnessing—even listening—burdens the fieldworker with a debt that transmutes into the physical body, then into the unconscious, and as a consequence, there are difficulties in objectively writing about what has already been claimed by the body. Besides the body, material products, such as fieldnotes, audio-visual recordings, images, memories, and texts, bear the residue of the violence that complicates the fieldworker’s experiences.



Figure 2: Security guards the outer perimeter of a lila.

One of the ways of working with dance "on field" was improvisation, an ongoing process of trial and error (Cerwonka and Malkki, 2007). Since participant observation remained the crucial method of forming an ethnography, I could not abandon it on site. However, while "writing up" as a fledgling scholar, I realized that marginalizing accounts of witnessing, knowing, or experiencing forms of violence reiterates asexual, ungendered fieldwork as normative and credible. The kinds of compromises and micro-aggressions we encounter while doing fieldwork are tied to how gendered bodies are differentially situated within the social context of a place. Violence and vulnerability rarely privilege a female ethnographer on site (Behar, 1996); through conversations with women performers, I could, however, eke out a few narratives of those who have carried violence of any form on them, along them, within them into their dance.

My Meitei interlocutors were from middle-class socio-economic backgrounds, but a few of them were members of cultural elites. Many work as intellectuals, artists, activists, teachers, university students, or media persons or work in an informal, shift-based economy. Some of them also marched for and against ILP protest rallies. All practitioners were most cooperative. They allowed me to observe their practices, explained their processes, dictated notes to me, and spoke into my recorder or camera—happy to impart knowledge. Expecting hesitation, in the beginning, I would hardly ask about the impacts of violence. As days went by, when protest marches and strikes due to the ILP movement occurred regularly, my interlocutors weighed in on their notions concerning violence themselves. My position as an ethnographer was defined as much by the field as it was by any previous training or research design; ethnography was relying on getting "surprised" (Cerwonka and Malkki, 2007, p. 174), a process of becoming, of unfinished storytelling, of assemblage (see Biehl and Locke, 2017). Interlocutors mentioned things such as that Manipur has a "culture of protest," which halts all aspects of life on a daily basis. Yet they were defiantly proud that "no one takes it lying down." While they were affected, and also offered various opinions about their own community, they encouraged me

to observe, engage, and write on dance that belonged to the social, cultural, spiritual life, but also endured the messy backstage of political, surveilled, and unpredictable everyday life.

During my fieldwork, I continued to train under two practitioners in Imphal. It kept me in touch with other performers—this is what Tim Ingold describes as an approach to doing ethnography “with” people (2008, p. 82), moving to understand cultural forms and the discourses they are associated with. It was an approach of attending to the body—mine, as researcher, and those of the performers—a way to ask about experience, sociality, and practice. One performer I took martial arts/dance lessons from was a *thang-ta* practitioner. The other practitioner was a consummate teacher who, due to her advanced age, did not dance. Over past decades, however, she had been instrumental in bringing dance from ritual space to the stage; movement lessons with her helped me probe into such aspects of Manipur’s dance history as stylistic differences between genres, structure, and the aesthetics of new choreographies. I attended training sessions at other practitioners’ studios, as well. I occasionally danced at rituals where sharing of knowledge seemed conditional on my participating and presenting dance skills.

Dances of the Meiteis are locally accepted as ways of performing history, society, and cosmology, from the deepest past all the way to contemporary Manipur. The centrality of dances of/in rituals is important for what Susan Reed calls the “ideas of the group’s distinctiveness” (2010, p. 4). It is fundamental to the politics of culture, visibility, ethnicity, and mythic/contemporary Meitei identity, an embodiment of the community in the region and the nation. Dances have gained popularity through the retelling and reinterpretation as performing art of the mythic episodes that many rituals are based on. Almost all of the dances are about numinous beings and sacred landscapes of Manipur, and stories and sites that transcend geographical borders of region, state, and nation. Through these dances, performers and audience find the means to survive mentally, physically, spiritually, and creatively.

At times of conflict, doing dance takes on other meanings. Referring to *dabke* in the recent years, Fadila Khalid writes how dance, embedded

within the heart and soul of the Palestinian people, becomes a mode to "reclaim their cultural identity, defiantly asserting their existence and resilience in the face of systemic oppression, while igniting a flame of resistance that resonates with generations past and present, affirming their connection with the land" (2023). Dana Mills reminds us that although many old specters are haunting the world, new specters of solidarity, of integrity, of courage, of togetherness, and of reverence of knowledge are being formed, enabling new worlds to unfold and new stories to be told in/through dance (2021, p. 166–167). Dizzying shifts and in-betweens provide prospects for reflection. The following vignette is from a period of pause during conflict.

During the five-day period called *Yaoshang*, *Thabal-chongba*—a mixed-gender social dance to usher in spring, one also marking new beginnings in harvest and in life—is performed in Manipur valley.⁴ Roughly translated as "leaping in moonlight," movements are improvised to varying rhythm. *Thabal-chongba* dances are hosted at night in playgrounds and streets; they prompt everyone to engage in riotous celebration, which is otherwise curtailed due to severe security measures after dusk. Participation in *Thabal* is not unlike a rite-of-passage for the Meitei youth—they enjoy the nights that contest a social vacuum created by the presence of the military, excessive policing by militant factions and concerned kin, and an absence of economic abundance. Meitei youth collectively travel till early hours of the morning from one *Thabal* to the next.

On one of the evenings of *Yaoshang*, an IED (improvised explosive device) exploded in the market area of Imphal. That night, at *Thabal-chongba*, people refused to comment on the incident; they wanted to defer the inevitable that surrounds their everyday life. Many months later when I was listening to yet another interlocutor discuss another such explosion at a dance ritual,⁵ I had to concede that violence

4. *Yaoshang* coincides with the Hindu festival of colors, *Holi*

5. Anon. "Terror strikes Iskcon temple—Child among 4 dead in Imphal explosion," *The Telegraph*, August 16, 2006. <https://www.telegraphindia.com/india/terror-strikes-iskcon-temple-child-among-4-dead-in-imphal-explosion/cid/777393>.

cyclically returns to Manipur. The social and cultural side of violence was powerful to me. Focusing on the physicality of violence alone would give an incomplete perspective. As I watched a large number of people put on their most stylish attire to dance *Thabal*—or as I imagine scores of devotees resolved to return to the dance in rituals every season—it appeared that the performance traditions of the Meiteis have been mediating invisible violence for longer than I or anyone have taken notice.

Taking off from Maria-Adriana Deiana's description of dance as a heuristic device that can recalibrate our understanding of the everyday affective and embodied politics of/in armed conflict in Bosnia and Northern Ireland (2023, p. 4), *Thabal-chongba* contains the potential to disrupt, continue, and reclaim public space through dancing on streets once/also marked by violence. What I witnessed at *Thabal* on the night of the explosion and thereafter was a deeply playful, boisterous, and overall, indulgent experience of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque that is unseen in any other form or style of Meitei dancing. The unrestrained, improvised movements dismantle and almost challenge the silent acquiescence that follows violent events.

However, reveling in danced resistance in the midst of conflict in Manipur is not always possible. During the ILP movement, a sense of normality in the aftermath of protracted violence kept getting delayed due to protests, strikes, and curfews. A few weeks of torrential rain had not stopped the peoples' movement in the streets. Bodies in defiance, bodies taut, alert, together in chanting slogans, ready to leap, never to hide—people said it was a revolution in the making. The lingering echoes of conflict, within and outside dance, were becoming visible. Dance students enrolled in degree programs, wanting to get together to discuss their curriculum, failed to do so due to curfew hours and frequent strikes. Many interviewees complained that they could not keep up with regular practice. Manipuri and all other dances from the state are largely ensemble practices, with few individuals who choose to hone their skills as soloists. Here, dance is not solitary or individual, and it is considered beneficial to practice

together with peers. Moreover, it weaves broad networks of artisans with diverse skills and crafts; the frequent consultations with allied artists and mentors aid in the progress and improvement of creative standards. The absence of collaborative work during troubled times made dancers restless.

Interlocutors would also lament that their talents were getting lost when violence erupted so frequently. Dance is more than joy or reenactment of rituals. Dance is work. Most dancers accept a broad range of creative work, for which they receive a range of remuneration. Although it was evident from conversing with them that dance did not bring sustainable income, it did contribute toward their livelihood. Performers indicated that they cannot turn down creative work. Aheibam acknowledged his payments from participation as a drummer-dancer in various Hindu socio-religious rituals sustain his small family. But protracted conflict meant clients preferred small gatherings with fewer performers. At the time of our conversation, he had lost quite a few opportunities. Such conversations made me aware that the rich repertoire of body-based, performance-based histories mask, absorb, and often are subsumed by complexities arising from militarism and interethnic or other forms of violence.



Figure 3: Imphal neighbourhood on a strike day.

Looking back/within my dancing body: Chabungbam Babina Devi

It was only when I had sat down to have a conversation/interview with a visiting researcher, Sani, that I confronted my experiences of violent conflict in recent months.⁶ Till then, I had chosen not to give in to words of fear and the despair I felt, along with a certain numbness of thought and feelings. I had returned home/field to conduct interviews for my last phase of doctoral research, when violence broke out in May 2023. Sani asked me how I felt and how I had been responding to the violence as a researcher and dancer, as well as someone who belonged to one of the communities involved in the conflict. I said, "the researcher took a backseat in May."

Violence is not new to me or us. But my memories from this May are replete with relentless echoes of gunshots, sirens, tear gas explosions interrupted by eerie silences, and the gloom of loss and sadness. After May, I resumed fieldwork reluctantly. I started meeting people during the short intervals when public curfew imposed by the state was relaxed. "Reluctantly," because I doubted people would want to talk about dance when the dancing body itself had become a site of violence. During interviews with people for my research and my being interviewed by my visiting researcher friend, I realized I am both a researcher and an interlocutor. I can speak and write as the observer and the observed, shifting my position whenever necessary.

How did I navigate the field as a site of research and home when violence and curfews disrupted what we had previously considered normal everyday life? On some days, interviews were cut short because curfew hours were nearing and the probability of getting stranded or even the risk of bodily harm was high. On other days, sudden news of violent altercations between protestors and state forces would ensure an end to conversations. A library and archive I frequented during those months

6. Several months have passed since interethnic conflict broke out between the Meitei and the Kuki-Zo communities in the state of Manipur (India), on May 3, 2023. I happen to be a Meitei. Many on both sides have lost lives, homes, and hope. Over sixty thousand people have been displaced.



Figure 4: Meitei devotees and police personnel deployed at the conflict sites congregating at the Govindaji temple, Imphal.

became an intermediary space. I would go back there after conducting interviews and before I would finally leave for home, when altercations settled or it felt safer. I met my key interlocutor at this library. She helped me to connect with dance practitioners who I wanted to meet. Many conversations around dance were had on our way to and back from the interviews—her Scooty Pep was a witness to many such conversations. On stricter curfew days, we would wear *pumngou phanek*, traditional or ritual clothing meant for funerals and death-related rituals; the attire served as an interim pass for freer movement between localities. On even rougher days, a close journalist friend would drop me home safely. Their "Press"-imprinted vest ensured a safe passage.

However, on the days I felt safer, I chose to commute by shared auto rickshaws. More than serving the purpose of arriving at my destinations, commuting by three-wheelers, with strangers, enabled me to partake in ordinary conversations about the extraordinary times we were living in. One evening, I boarded the last auto rickshaw at the main market. It was close to 5:00 p.m., the hour when curfew was due to begin. The market area was deserted. Passengers tried to accommodate as many people as possible to be seated, and the driver took the trouble of taking each one of us to our homes even though it was not his usual route. On the bumpy ride, I got a glimpse of how (we) people made sense, as a collective, of troubled times, attempting to cope with the harsh realities and risks of the ongoing conflict around us.

Sani came to Manipur the preceding year to study the choreographic works of a Meitei contemporary dancer, Bon. Bon's works draw heavily on his experiences of growing up and living in a society scarred with conflict and violence. Moreover, given the cultural pool from which he derives his movement vocabularies, Bon wanted to ensure that my friend watched traditional dance performances, too. I accompanied her to watch a *jagoi raas* performance at the Govindaji temple—one of the most-known Hindu religious sites in Imphal.⁷ My ongoing research focuses on *jagoi raas* as an embodied and cultural repertoire, and the Govindaji temple has been the primary site of my fieldwork where I can observe traditional dances in ritual settings.

Later during our conversation, I inquired about her memories of that evening of observing *jagoi raas*. To me, her recollections, as a “new” audience, mattered, because they helped me to understand how someone outside our ethnic or performance community would relate to the dance. Sani talked of the soundscape, the lively ambience, and the clanging sounds of big cymbals. She recalled how we decorated ourselves with *nachom*, small assemblage of flowers prepared by women called *malini* at the temple, and my telling her that the ear on which one wears the *nachom* represents one's marital status: that is, unmarried women wear it on the left ear, whereas married women tuck it behind their right ear. She further mentioned she could see traces of steps and a version of the minimalist body movements seen in Bon's new contemporary choreographic work *Meepao* (news of the living: *mee*, “the living”; *pao*, “news,” 2022).

Meepao was conceived during the COVID-19 pandemic, when life became uncertain and many lost their loved ones. Dancers in this choreography begin to move with deliberate, stylized, minimal movement of the feet. Movements gradually escalate till they attain complete unison. Or until they ascend to a liminal state in which the dancers sense

7. A term such as “worship” is preferred over “watch,” as *jagoi raas* is a deeply devotional ritual performance, during which the devotees pay obeisance to gods of the Hindu pantheon. *Jagoi raas lila* is a performance narrative depicting “love play,” as imagined in the Hindu, and more specifically, the Gaudiya Vaishnav faith; it features Krishna and the divine consorts Radha and the Gopis.

they can send messages from the living world to that of the dead. At the stage of conceiving the choreography, I helped write the concept note of *Meepao*; I knew the basic premise of loss and uncertainty around which the choreography grew. And I had lost someone close to me, too. The last lines of the concept note thus read: "We whisper to them that our memories will be their new homes." In the last two years, *Meepao* has grown, its meanings, movements, and interpretations adapted to changed times, but since death and uncertainty remains, since violence remains, we still dance *Meepao* imbued with memories of death and violence (see Iyenger, 2022) and most probably will continue to do so.

More recently, I communicated to Sani that I had danced *jagoi raas* in the autumn of 2023 as a way to commemorate the end of my doctoral research. She expressed how beautiful and resilient the society and people have been in troubled times. It is inspiring to possess the knowledge that dances and performances continued after conflict had temporarily settled. But it is not as simple as it seems. Dance and many other socio-cultural festivals have had to come to a halt since the outbreak of violence in May 2023. Who will dance when our lives are in mortal danger? But when news circulated that *jagoi raas* will be performed as a ritual on the forthcoming full moon night of the lunar month of *Hiyangei*,⁸ as always, many expressed discontent. Only a few recollected that the reenactment of *jagoi raas* this autumn is a fitting ritual, as it is reminiscent of our ancestors dancing *jagoi raas* during the bombings of the Second World War in Manipur.⁹ In contradiction to those who view ritual dances as festivity, celebration, or entertainment, dance practitioners believe otherwise. To them, *jagoi raas* is a ritual that is performed/offered to the Hindu divinities to put an end to cycles of suffering. The Gaudiya Vaishnav faithful believe in conventional ways and in the ritual efficacy of offering *jagoi raas*. Furthermore, many Meiteis believe that rituals—when danced—bring about social healing.

8. *Hiyangei* corresponds to the months of October/November.

9. Imphal in Manipur was the site of battle between Allied forces and the Japanese army in the China-Burmese-India theater of the Second World War between 1942 and 1945.



Figure 5: A costumer taking measurements of the performers just before the second wave of COVID-19 led to cancellation of the *jagoi raas* they were set to perform in.

During the turbulent months of the recent conflict, I met one of the oldest living performer/singers of *jagoi raas*, Ima Madhabi. At the time, Ima Madhabi was 96 years old.¹⁰ She had an unending collection of stories to share. Ima Madhabi recalled how the erstwhile king of Manipur pestered her into becoming one of the dancers at the royal palace. This became an important juncture in her life as a performer. Even at her advanced age, she used to teach dance and music. One of the villages where she taught and performed *jagoi raas* regularly until a few decades ago endured severe acts of violence. Those memories lingered alongside traces of the violence. Between her storytelling sessions, she would look at the setting sun and ask us to leave before it went dark: “Go back safely. I will wait for you tomorrow.” For someone who had lived through a century of unrest, her words showed care for the young dancers. Ima Madhabi would say that the “dung(s) and dang(s)” (sounds of tear gas shells) would keep her awake at night. With a hope that conflict would end soon, she sang the sequences of *jagoi raas* twice every day, in her morning and evening prayers. Her memories and lived experiences

10. At the time of writing this essay, Ima Madhabi passed away on December 10, 2023.

create the lived domain from which her practice has emerged and has transmitted to the next generation of curious dancers—us.

Unlike Bon's work *Meepao*, that directly respond to the changing political climate of the society as creative interventions, Ima Madhabi's singing of *jagoi raas* speaks of her inherent faith in the restorative power of our songs and dances. Bon dances resistance; Ima sings with resilience. Both invoke a collective Meitei experience of the past and present. As a member of the same collective, when I danced in *jagoi raas* as part of my fieldwork, I initially felt a sense of guilt, mostly driven by thoughts of how one could dance when people were dying. But people do dance—if only to set up a counternarrative to the conflict we live through.

I am reminded of Oja Memcha, a well-respected dance practitioner. Along with other villagers, Oja Memcha volunteers to guard the perimeter of her village from dissenting factions with whom our community was in conflict. One day she informed me that we did not have much time at hand to meet. She had just returned after keeping vigil through the night and was required to return that afternoon for another round of duty. Despite the circulation of a rumor of an impending gun attack on her village later that day, Oja Memcha had arranged for practitioners to demonstrate their dance. The women danced in her courtyard. I documented their movements on video. As they danced, they seemed fearless, lost in the movements. Although we carried a lingering fear from the nights that had come before and there was an urgency to return to guard the village, from these dancers I perceived how gendered, embodied knowledge, including sights and sounds, vulnerability, and creativity are carefully communicated. After all, why do we dance? Or rather, why do we to fight? Why do we have to resist, if not for the purpose of culture to survive? Dance makes it possible.

Afterdance

After almost a year of intense interethnic conflict, Manipur at present exists in a state of schism. During a conversation with a Meitei who currently resides away from their homeland, as the fresh spate of violence

unfolded, we descended into an argument on the rights of performers. They opined that no one should dance, as it is an “expression of light-heartedness” amid a “serious thing, such as a violent conflict.” Reeling from the argument, it dawned how such simplistic narratives unduly narrow the complex lived experiences and affective states felt by communities impacted by armed conflict (Deiana, 2023, p. 479). But we realized that it is perhaps because very few consciously trace the interconnections between histories of dance and conflict. It may never be spoken by most who undergo crises. However, a deep look at dance-dancers’-danced experiences show they transcend mere artistic expression. They may serve as a resolute act of defiance as the waves of conflict do not recede.

A post-conflict society is one where efforts and institutions are invested in rehabilitation and a hope of outliving conflict. So, if the frames of cultural and processual work by dance in a post-conflict society is not perceptible – would the intrinsicality of dance dissipate? If artistic interventions are not always possible – in the dark times, can’t there be any dancing? What can dance do if society repetitively collides with conflict, and if there is no “post”?

Author Biographies

Debanjali Biswas is an early career researcher in performance studies and social anthropology, and a dance practitioner. Her PhD titled ‘Performance and Violence in everyday lifesin Manipur’ was completed from King’s College London on a Commonwealth Scholarship. She has edited the anthology *Nachom: Exploring Harmony through Manipuri Dance Writings* (2024), published “Dance Cultures” in *The Routledge Companion to Northeast India* (2022) and in *South Asian Dance Intersections* (2023), and an essay is forthcoming in *The Oxford Handbook of Indian Dance* (2024). She is currently the recipient of British Academy Small Research Grant. As the current TaPRA Research Fellow with Showtown History Centre (Blackpool) and a Grantee with Women’s History Network (UK) she is exploring historic collections in search of Asian performers in early twentieth-century Britain.

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