

Embodied Devotion and Cultural Negotiation: Manipuri Nritya between Ritual and Stage (Bangladesh)

Sweetie Das

Dance Practitioner, Founder & Director, Dikhsha Institute of Dance and PhD Research Scholar,
Jahangirnagar University, Bangladesh

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.1014MG0165>

Received: 26 July 2026; Accepted: 31 July 2026; Published: 11 August 2026

ABSTRACT

Manipuri Nritya is a classical dance tradition deeply rooted in devotional spirituality, ritual practice, and the cultural life of the Manipuri community. Historically, the tradition has evolved through the coexistence of pre-Vaishnavite indigenous ritual practices, such as Lai Haraoba, and later Vaishnavite devotional expressions, particularly Raslila and other Krishna-centred religious performances. These interconnected traditions have shaped Manipuri dance as an embodied medium through which spiritual beliefs, collective memory, cultural narratives, and community identity are transmitted. In contemporary Bangladesh, Manipuri Nritya exists within both sacred ritual spaces and modern theatrical contexts, creating new possibilities for cultural engagement, adaptation, and reinterpretation.

This paper examines how embodied devotion is expressed and transformed through the shifting contexts of ritual and performance among the Manipuri community in Bangladesh. Drawing upon the theoretical perspectives of Kapila Vatsyayan, Susan L. Schwartz, Victor Turner, and Urmimala Sarkar Munshi, the study explores the relationship between ritual practice, embodiment, and cultural negotiation in Manipuri dance. Based on ethnographic fieldwork, participant observation, interviews, and performance analysis, the research investigates how performers, practitioners, and communities negotiate between inherited devotional traditions and contemporary forms of representation.

The paper argues that the movement of Manipuri Nritya from ritual settings to proscenium stages should not be understood as a simple transition from sacred to secular practice. Rather, it represents an ongoing process of cultural negotiation through which traditional meanings are preserved, adapted, and reinterpreted within changing social and cultural contexts. Through this process, embodied performance becomes a significant site for sustaining identity, preserving cultural memory, and articulating community values.

By analysing the interaction between ritual embodiment and staged representation in Bangladesh, this study highlights Manipuri Nritya as a living tradition that continuously negotiates continuity and change. It demonstrates how dance functions simultaneously as a devotional practice and a dynamic medium of cultural expression, enabling the Manipuri community to sustain heritage while responding to contemporary realities.

Keywords: Manipuri Nritya; Ritual Practice; Embodied Devotion; Cultural Negotiation; Bangladesh



INTRODUCTION

The Manipuri community of Bangladesh has preserved a distinctive cultural identity through the continuous practice of its rich traditions, including dance, music, theatre, and ritual performances. These cultural expressions are not merely artistic forms; rather, they function as vital markers of collective identity, spirituality, and community life. Within the Manipuri worldview, love, devotion, and religious faith constitute foundational values that shape cultural practice. The identity of the Manipuri community may broadly be understood through ethno-linguistic and religious dimensions. Within the community, diverse traditions coexist. The Meitei Manipuris preserve ritual practices rooted in pre-Vaishnava beliefs, while the adoption of Vaishnavism—particularly under the influence of Sri Chaitanya—led to the emergence of a Krishna-centered devotional culture that profoundly transformed Manipuri dance, music, and ritual life. Alongside these groups, the Pangal (Manipuri Muslim) community represents another distinct cultural identity within the broader Manipuri society. The Pangal (Manipuri Muslim) community does not practice the traditional ritual traditions of either the Meitei Manipuri or Bishnupriya Manipuri communities, such as Lai Haraoba and Raslila. Instead, they observe Islamic religious beliefs and ritual practices while maintaining aspects of Manipuri cultural identity, including the Manipuri language and social customs. (Sinha D. R., 2014)

Manipuri dance traditions may further be understood through two complementary modes of practice: participatory and ritual. Participatory dances such as Thabal Chongba, performed during Holi, Khubak Ishai during Ratha Yatra Festivals emphasize collective celebration and social bonding. In contrast, ritual performances such as Lai Haraoba function as sacred enactments of myth, cosmology, and cultural memory, where dance becomes a medium of worship and narrative transmission. Sruti Bandyopadhyay's observations closely resonate with my fieldwork findings. My research demonstrates that Manipuri dance embodies both Vaishnavite devotional aesthetics and indigenous ritual consciousness. This duality reflects the coexistence of sacred ritual practice and communal cultural expression within Manipuri performance traditions. Such a perspective highlights that Manipuri dance functions not only as an act of religious devotion but also as a medium through which collective memory, cultural continuity, and community identity are constructed, negotiated, and sustained. (Bandhopadhyay, 2023)

This paper examines how these ritual and performative traditions negotiate cultural identity within the Manipuri community of Bangladesh. It argues that Manipuri dance is not only a religious and aesthetic practice but also a dynamic cultural medium through which identity, continuity, and heritage are continuously reinterpreted in changing socio-cultural contexts. Methodologically, this study adopts an ethnographic and practice-based approach based on fieldwork conducted among the Manipuri community in Bangladesh. The research draws upon participant observation, in-depth interviews, informal conversations, and performance documentation from different locations, including villages in Moulvibazar district (Ghoramara, Tilakpur, and Adampur) and urban Manipuri practitioners in Dhaka. The study incorporates insights from ritual practitioners, dancers, and community members, including Rasdhari Usharani Devi and Chandramohon Ojha, to understand how embodied performance practices sustain devotion, cultural memory, and identity. As a practitioner-researcher, the author also engages with embodied knowledge gained through long-term involvement with Manipuri dance practice and community engagement. Through this ethnographic exploration, the paper contributes to the understanding of Manipuri Nritya in Bangladesh by examining the relationship between ritual, embodiment, and stage performance. It highlights how dance operates simultaneously as a devotional practice, a marker of cultural belonging, and a means of negotiating tradition within contemporary social contexts.

What is Manipuri Dance?

Manipuri dance is best understood as a multidimensional cultural practice that transcends the conventional definition of a performing art. It is an embodied expression of spirituality, ritual significance, aesthetic philosophy, and collective identity that has been transmitted across generations.

My ethnographic fieldwork identifies two interrelated dimensions of Manipuri dance. The first is the ritual dimension, in which dance functions as an embodied act of devotion (bhakti). Within this context, movement, rhythm, gesture, and musical accompaniment operate as symbolic forms of spiritual communication rather than as mere aesthetic display. The second is the cultural-aesthetic dimension, where dance represents artistic refinement, discipline, and beauty while simultaneously serving as a medium through which collective identity and cultural continuity are expressed and sustained. These findings are supported by interviews with Rasdhari Usha Rani Devi and Chandramohon Ojha, both of whom emphasized that Manipuri dance is inseparable from devotional music, the rhythmic structure of the Pung, and codified bodily movement. Together, these elements transform dance into a sacred practice that establishes a devotional relationship between the performer and the divine. Their perspectives further demonstrate that Manipuri dance functions as both a ritual performance and a cultural expression, reinforcing the community's shared religious values, historical memory, and collective identity.

This interpretation is consistent with Padma Shri Guru Darshana Jhaveri and Guru kalavati Devi's conceptualization of Manipuri dance (Jagoi or Nartyan) as a classical tradition comprising Nritya, Nritya, and Natya, integrating rhythmic movement, expressive storytelling, and dramatic representation through the four dimensions of Angika, Vachika, Aharya, and Sattvika Abhinaya, as described in the Natyashastra (Darshana Jhaveri, 1993)

Furthermore, Sruti Bandyopadhyay's observations resonate with my fieldwork, demonstrating that Manipuri dance embodies both Vaishnavite devotional aesthetics and indigenous ritual consciousness. This dual

structure—where ritual devotion coexists with communal celebration—illustrates how Manipuri performance traditions negotiate sacred practice and cultural expression, contributing to the formation and continuity of collective identity. Therefore, Manipuri dance should be understood not merely as a performing art but as a living cultural heritage that embodies religious belief, ritual practice, aesthetic philosophy, historical memory, and collective identity.

Bangladesh and the Manipuri Community

Bangladesh is a culturally diverse South Asian country where multiple ethnic and religious communities coexist. Among them, the Manipuri community occupies a distinctive position through its dance, music, rituals, and festivals.

Historically, Manipuris migrated from the Kingdom of Manipur in Northeast India, particularly during the Burmese invasion (1819–1826), known as Chahi Taret Khuntakpa (Seven Years Devastation). Subsequent political instability and British colonial intervention further displaced populations into neighboring regions, including present-day Bangladesh. (Kamei, 2015)

Today, Manipuri communities are primarily concentrated in the Sylhet region, especially in Moulvibazar, Habiganj, and Sunamganj districts. Despite migration and socio-political change, they have successfully preserved their language, ritual practices, and cultural heritage, making them one of the most culturally resilient communities in Bangladesh.

From Ritual to Stage: Cultural Negotiation of Manipuri Dance in Bangladesh

One of the most significant transformations in Manipuri dance in Bangladesh is its transition from a community-based ritual practice to a proscenium stage performance. This shift reflects a process of cultural negotiation in which sacred traditions are recontextualized within modern artistic and institutional frameworks.

Fieldwork interviews with Sharmila Bandyopadhyay reveal that the early introduction of Manipuri dance into Bangladesh's urban cultural sphere began through the initiatives of Jiarul Mannan at the Bangladesh Academy of Fine Arts (BAFA). According to her, his choreographic works drew upon Manipuri musical structures and compositions; however, these productions did not yet reflect the codified movement vocabulary and pedagogical framework of the classical Manipuri dance tradition. As she explained, performers danced to compositions based on Manipuri music, and these performances were identified as "Manipuri dance," yet a comprehensive understanding of the classical form was still limited. Sharmila Bandyopadhyay further noted that Master Babu Singha later introduced the foundational movement vocabulary (Chali) and rhythmic training based on the Pung tradition, thereby strengthening the technical foundations of Manipuri dance practice in Bangladesh.

According to her, the most significant turning point occurred when Chhayanaut invited Guru Shantibala Devi to Bangladesh to teach Manipuri dance. This marked the beginning of systematic and authentic training based on the traditional guru–shishya lineage. Guru Shantibala Devi introduced the fundamental techniques, aesthetic principles, and pedagogical methods of the classical Manipuri dance tradition, laying the foundation for formal Manipuri dance education in Bangladesh. Her disciple, Tamanna Rahman, subsequently played a pioneering role in disseminating this tradition through teaching and performance, contributing significantly to its wider recognition and ensuring its transmission to future generations. (Bandhyapadhai, 2026)

Subsequently, dancers such as Sharmila Bandhyapadhai, Warda Rihab, and Samina Hossain Prema, and many other Manipuri dancers trained through ICCR scholarships in India, contributed to institutional dissemination through teaching and choreography. At the same time, Meitei artists preserved ritual authenticity within classical frameworks.

According to scholar Jamil Ahmed, the institutionalization of Manipuri dance in Bangladesh reflects a broader cultural process in which traditional ritual forms are restructured through academic training, stage aesthetics, and national cultural institutions. He emphasizes that this transformation does not erase ritual meaning; rather, it produces a “hybrid performative field” where sacred and secular aesthetics coexist. (Ahmed, 2006)

My fieldwork supports this interpretation while also revealing the embodied dimensions of this cultural transformation. Although contemporary stage performances are rooted in the ritual traditions of the Manipuri community, the embodied practices of ritual and theatrical performance differ significantly. Dancers trained in urban institutions undergo systematic technical instruction, developing precision in body alignment, rhythmic control, and choreographic composition. Their performances are further shaped by theatrical elements such as stage space, lighting, costume, audience, and performance conventions.

In contrast, my observation of Raslila within the Manipuri community revealed a different mode of embodiment. Here, the dancers' movements are guided primarily by devotional consciousness rather than technical display. The body functions as a medium of bhakti, where movement is inseparable from ritual practice and spiritual intention. During my observation of the Chhayanaut Classical Dance Festival, I found that urban-trained Manipuri dancers emphasized technical refinement and aesthetic precision, whereas performers in Raslila embodied devotion through ritualized movement. These are not contradictory forms of practice but distinct expressions of the same cultural tradition. This comparison led me to understand that culture is not a fixed or bounded entity; rather, it is embodied, negotiated, and continuously reinterpreted through performance. The coexistence of ritual embodiment and theatrical embodiment demonstrates how Manipuri dance in Bangladesh continually negotiates between sacred tradition and contemporary stage practice. Rather than representing a loss of authenticity, this process illustrates the dynamic cultural negotiation through which Manipuri dance preserves its ritual foundations while adapting to new artistic and institutional contexts.

Ritual Practice as Cultural Process

Ritual should be understood not merely as a religious act but as a dynamic cultural process through which communities construct, communicate, and sustain meaning. Catherine Bell argues that ritual is an active process of ritualization, through which social values, identities, and relationships are continually produced rather than simply represented. From this perspective, ritual is a form of cultural practice that shapes both individual experience and collective identity. (Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions*, 1997)

Building upon this understanding, Monica Wilson argues that “rituals reveal values at their deepest level”. Rituals embody those beliefs, emotions, and moral principles that members of a community consider most significant. Wilson further emphasizes that the meanings attached to ritual symbols by the participants themselves are essential for understanding the cultural significance of ritual practice. (Wilson, 1954)

Drawing on Wilson's insights, Victor Turner conceptualizes ritual as a symbolic and social process through which communities express collective consciousness, negotiate social relationships, and reinforce cultural continuity. Ritual, therefore, should not be viewed simply as ceremonial activity but as a meaningful social drama in which symbols, performance, and participation communicate shared cultural values. (L.Grimes, 2004) (Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti- Structure*, 1966) (Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti- Structure*, 1969)

These theoretical perspectives are particularly relevant to the study of Manipuri ritual performances. Within the Manipuri community, Raslila, Nata Sankirtana, and Lai Haraoba are not merely religious ceremonies or aesthetic performances; they function as living cultural texts through which devotion, collective memory, moral values, and community identity are continuously expressed and transmitted. The symbolic movements, music, costumes, ritual procedures, and devotional participation embody the Vaishnavite worldview while reinforcing the cultural continuity of the Manipuri community. My ethnographic fieldwork among the Manipuri community in Bangladesh further supports these theoretical perspectives. Interviews with practitioners and repeated participation in Raslila, Lai Haraoba, Ratha yatra and other ritual performances revealed that community members understand these rituals not simply as performances but as acts of seva (devotional service), cultural preservation, and collective belonging. Their interpretations demonstrate that the significance of ritual lies in the meanings attributed to it by the practitioners themselves, thereby reinforcing Wilson's argument that rituals reveal a community's deepest values and Turner's understanding of ritual as a symbolic process through which culture, identity, and social life are continuously reproduced. (Turner, *The Ritual Process : Structuer and Anti- Structure*, 1969)

Thus, ritual performance within the Manipuri community should be understood as an embodied cultural process in which religion, performance, identity, and community life become inseparable. Rather than functioning solely as sacred ceremonies, these ritual practices serve as dynamic cultural mechanisms through which Manipuri identity is preserved, negotiated, and reimagined across generations in both Bangladesh and India.

(Bell, *Ritual : Perspective and Dimensions*, 1997). In the Manipuri context, rituals such as Raas Leela, Nata Sankirtana, and Lai Haraoba function as embodied cultural systems that construct identity and social cohesion.

This perspective aligns with Victor Turner's concept of ritual as "social drama" (Turner, *Social Drama and Stories about Them*, 1980) and Clifford Geertz's view of culture as a symbolic system (Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 1973). Within Manipuri society, ritual performance transforms devotional philosophy into lived experience through music, movement, and collective participation. Edward Shils and Émile Durkheim further reinforce the inseparable relationship between belief and ritual, highlighting how sacred meaning is enacted through embodied practice.

Thus, ritual becomes a living cultural strategy through which Manipuri identity is continuously reproduced.

Cultural Negotiation among the Manipuri Community in Bangladesh

Cultural negotiation refers to a continuous process through which communities preserve their cultural heritage while simultaneously adapting to the socio-cultural realities of their surrounding environment. Rather than being a static entity, culture is constantly reconstructed through interaction, adaptation, resistance, and exchange. The experience of the Manipuri community in Bangladesh presents a significant example of such cultural negotiation, where ethnic identity, ritual practices, language, dress, and religious traditions are continuously redefined within the context of a Bengali-speaking Muslim-majority society.

According to Clifford Geertz, culture is "a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which people communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life." (Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 1973) From this perspective, rituals, language, religious practices, and cultural performances function as symbolic systems through which communities construct, communicate, and sustain meaning. For the Manipuri community in Bangladesh, cultural practices such as Ras Lila, Nata Sankirtana, Lai Haraoba, and Vaishnava religious observances serve as important markers of collective identity and cultural continuity.

The process of cultural negotiation is also evident in the linguistic practices of the Manipuri community in Bangladesh. Having lived in Bangladesh for nearly two centuries, Manipuris have maintained sustained interaction with the Bengali-speaking population. Consequently, Bengali linguistic elements and locally used expressions, such as *ji*, *pani*, and other everyday terms, have become integrated into their daily communication. This linguistic adaptation reflects the influence of the surrounding socio-cultural environment. However, it should not be understood as cultural assimilation; rather, it represents a strategic process of adaptation through which the community negotiates its place within a multicultural society while maintaining its distinct ethnic identity. As Stuart Hall argues, cultural identity is not a fixed essence but an ongoing process of becoming. The linguistic practices of the Manipuri community therefore illustrate this dynamic process of identity formation. (Hall, *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*, 1990)

My fieldwork further reveals that language plays a significant role in the transmission of Manipuri dance, particularly among urban dancers who are not native speakers of the Manipuri language. To understand the movement vocabulary, ritual concepts, and pedagogical instructions, they gradually learn Manipuri terminology alongside their dance training. During classes and rehearsals, teachers frequently use Manipuri words such as *phamo* (sit or be seated), *liklam* (tradition or customary practice), *khut* (hand), *khong* (leg), *chakcha* (food), *chakcha-yuthak* (food and drink), *hekpi* (to lift), *champra* (lemon), *champra-okpi* (to collect lemons), and *Pung Lol Jagoi* (dance performed with the rhythmic accompaniment of the Pung). Learning this vocabulary is not merely a linguistic exercise; it enables dancers to understand the cultural meanings embedded within the dance tradition. Thus, language becomes an integral component of embodied knowledge, illustrating how Manipuri dance in Bangladesh is transmitted through both physical practice and linguistic learning. This process further

demonstrates that cultural negotiation occurs not only through performance but also through the acquisition, preservation, and adaptation of language.

Lai Haraoba, one of the most significant ritual traditions associated with the indigenous religious heritage of the Manipuri people, faces challenges in Bangladesh due to demographic limitations and a shortage of ritual specialists. Consequently, Maibis and ritual performers are often invited from Manipur to conduct ceremonial performances. This reflects the community's effort to preserve ritual authenticity and maintain continuity with ancestral traditions despite geographical displacement. At the same time, the limited presence of locally trained ritual specialists illustrates the difficulties of sustaining indigenous ritual knowledge in a changing socio-religious environment. Ritual practice thus becomes a site where tradition and contemporary realities are continuously negotiated.

The dynamics of cultural negotiation are further evident in the public presentation of Manipuri performances. Contemporary cultural festivals and stage productions often involve artists from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds. In some cases, non-Manipuri or Bengali performers participate in the presentation of Manipuri dance traditions. While this broadens visibility and promotes cultural exchange, it also introduces reinterpretations and modifications. For instance, certain performers may not adopt Vaishnava symbols such as the tilak due to their own religious affiliations. This demonstrates how ritual performance, when shifted from sacred spaces to public cultural platforms, becomes a site of intercultural interaction where meanings are continuously redefined.

Dress practices similarly reflect processes of cultural negotiation. Traditional Manipuri attire such as the fanek, inafi, and pheijom continues to symbolize ethnic identity, particularly in ritual and ceremonial contexts. However, the increasing use of salwar-kameez, shirts, and trousers indicates adaptation to the dominant dress culture of Bangladesh. These changes should not be interpreted as cultural loss; rather, they demonstrate how geographical location, education, and everyday social interaction shape cultural expression. The coexistence of traditional and contemporary dress forms highlights the community's ability to maintain cultural continuity while engaging with social transformation.

An important dimension of cultural negotiation is visible in the role of cultural institutions in the preservation and promotion of Manipuri heritage in Bangladesh. Institutions such as Shadhona Cultural Centre, Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy, Chhayanaut, Manipuri Lalitkala Academy, and the Department of Dance at the University of Dhaka have created platforms for training, performance, research, and dissemination of Manipuri dance and cultural traditions. Through festivals, workshops, academic programs, and stage performances, these institutions have facilitated the representation of Manipuri culture beyond its ethnic boundaries.

Their involvement demonstrates that Manipuri cultural practices have become part of the broader cultural landscape of Bangladesh. While such institutional engagement contributes to preservation, it also generates new forms of interpretation through cross-cultural interaction. This reflects Homi K. Bhabha's concept of the "Third Space," (Bhabha, 1994) where cultural meanings are produced through negotiation between different traditions. In this sense, institutional support becomes a key mechanism through which ethnic identity and national cultural representation are continuously reshaped.

The Manipuri community in Bangladesh exemplifies this process. Despite adopting certain linguistic and cultural elements from the surrounding Bengali society, they continue to preserve distinctive ritual traditions, religious practices, and performance forms that sustain their ethnic identity. Interaction with the dominant culture, therefore, does not erase identity; rather, it contributes to its reconstruction.

Thus, the cultural life of the Manipuri community in Bangladesh should be understood not as a process of assimilation or simple preservation, but as an ongoing process of negotiation. Through language, ritual, dress, performance, and institutional engagement, the community continuously adapts while maintaining cultural continuity. Their experience demonstrates that cultural identity is produced through interaction, transformation, and representation.

Ultimately, cultural identity in this context emerges as a relational and performative process rather than a fixed essence

Embodied Devotion Through Lived Experience: An Ethnographic Reflection

My understanding of embodied devotion developed not only through learning Manipuri dance but also through repeated participation in the ritual life of the Manipuri community in Bangladesh. Over several years of fieldwork, I attended numerous Raslila performances and gradually realized that the meaning of the dance extends beyond choreographic structure or technical perfection. What became most significant was the atmosphere of collective devotion created through performance.

During Raslila, I frequently found myself emotionally immersed in the unfolding narrative. When Radha expressed *mana* (loving displeasure) and Krishna sought to reconcile with her, the emotional intensity of the performance generated a profound sense of empathy. At other moments, Krishna's playful running and joyful movements evoked spontaneous happiness among the audience. Finally, during the concluding arati, I noticed that my position had shifted from that of an observer to that of a participant. Without conscious intention, I joined the devotees in offering pranam. This transition demonstrates that Raslila is experienced not merely as a theatrical performance but as a devotional event in which performers and spectators collectively participate. These experiences gradually transformed my understanding of Manipuri dance. During the performance, questions concerning technical perfection, accuracy of movement, or choreographic execution became secondary. Instead, the primary experience was one of shared devotion. This suggests that the aesthetic power of Manipuri dance lies not simply in the precision of movement but in its ability to cultivate an embodied devotional experience shared by performers and audience alike. An important insight into this understanding came from Subhashis Sinha, a renowned Manipuri theatre artist and the founder of Manipuri Theatre of Bangladesh. While observing one of my choreographic works based on Radha's Ashta Kalina Lila, he remarked: "What you are teaching may be dance, but it does not yet create the atmosphere. Our dance is not only based on perfection; our practice is something much deeper (Sinha S. , 2014)." His words remained with me throughout my research. Initially, I understood them as an artistic critique; however, after repeatedly witnessing Raslila within the community, I came to recognize that he was referring to the devotional environment created through collective participation rather than technical accomplishment alone. His observation fundamentally reshaped my understanding of Manipuri performance.

Another significant moment occurred when my Guru, Kalavati Devi, visited the Manipuri community in Bangladesh during examinations organized by Shadhona. Coincidentally, the visit overlapped with the celebration of the Ratha Yatra festival. Rather than remaining a distinguished guest or senior teacher, she immediately joined the community in singing verses from Jayadeva's Gita Govinda, clapping rhythmically, dancing in circular formations, and participating joyfully alongside other devotees. Witnessing my Guru immersed in communal devotional practice revealed that for Manipuri practitioners there is no rigid separation between dance, ritual, and everyday religious life. Devotion is not simply represented through dance—it is lived through the body.

These ethnographic experiences strongly support Urmimala Sarkar Munsî's understanding that the dancing body is culturally produced through lived experience. Urmimala Sarkar Munsî argues, "Dance training starts with the training of the body and the mind. All dancing bodies are created and/or crafted; they are bodies that speak; and bodies that prepare to occupy public realm" (Munsî, 2022). This perspective resonates with my fieldwork among the Manipuri community in Bangladesh, where I observed that the dancing body is shaped not only through technical training but also through continuous participation in Raslila, Sankirtana, and other devotional rituals. Thus, embodied devotion emerges through lived religious experience as much as through dance practice. These observations further resonate with Kapila Vatsyayan's conception of Indian dance as an integration of body, mind, emotion, and spirituality. My fieldwork suggests that in Manipuri dance, *bhakti* is not merely performed but embodied through ritual practice and lived experience (Vatsyayan, 1997) Furthermore, they reflect Pallabi Chakravorty's argument that Indian dance traditions are continuously negotiated through cultural practice rather than existing solely as codified classical forms (Chakravorty, 2022). My field observations therefore suggest that the essence of Manipuri dance lies not only in its movement vocabulary but in the cultivation of embodied

devotion, where ritual participation, emotional experience, and cultural memory become inseparable from the dancing body.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the cultural experience of the Manipuri community in Bangladesh is neither a process of complete assimilation nor one of static cultural preservation. Rather, it is a dynamic process of cultural negotiation through which identity is continuously reconstructed and sustained through ritual practice, embodied performance, language, and everyday social interactions. Within this process, the community actively engages with the broader socio-cultural environment of Bangladesh while maintaining its distinct ethnic and cultural identity. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork, participant observation, and interviews, this study reveals that Manipuri dance serves as a vital site where tradition and transformation coexist. Ritual performances such as Raslila and Lai Haraoba continue to embody devotional consciousness and sacred practice, while stage performances, institutional training, and urban cultural spaces reinterpret these traditions within contemporary artistic contexts. These forms should not be understood as opposing categories but as complementary expressions of the same cultural heritage, each contributing to the continuity and renewal of Manipuri identity.

The findings further suggest that cultural negotiation extends beyond performance to include language, pedagogy, and embodied knowledge. The transmission of movement vocabulary, ritual concepts, musical practices, and the Manipuri language illustrates that dance is not merely an artistic discipline but a holistic cultural system through which memory, belief, and identity are communicated across generations.

This study contributes to existing scholarship by demonstrating that the body is a central site of cultural negotiation. Through embodied practice, Manipuri dancers negotiate between ritual devotion and theatrical performance, preserving the spiritual and cultural foundations of the tradition while responding creatively to changing social and institutional contexts. Consequently, Manipuri dance should be understood not simply as a classical performing art but as a living cultural heritage that continually embodies devotion, collective memory, cultural resilience, and identity within contemporary Bangladesh.

REFERENCES

1. Ahmed, S. J. (2006). Negotiating 'Theatre(In Place/Instead) of War'. *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance*, 59-75.
2. Bandhopadhyay, D. S. (2023). Choreographing the pancarasa-s in Manipuri Dance: Concept, Tradition and Presentation. In P. Chatterjee, Nanchom : Exploring Harmony Through Manipuri Dance Writings (p. 32). Gurugram: Shubhi Publications.
3. Bandhyapadhai, S. (2026, January). From Ritual to Stage. (P. r. Das, Interviewer)
4. Bell, C. (1997). *Ritual : Perspective and Dimensions*. New York: Oxford University Press, Inc.
5. Bell, C. (1997). *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions*. New York: Oxford University Press.
6. Bhaba, H. K. (1994). *The Location Of Culture*. London: Routledge.
7. Chakravorty, P. (2022). The body and the Cotagion: a symbiosis of Yoga, dance health and spirituality. *South Asian History and Culture*, 8.
8. Darshana Jhaveri, K. D. (1993). *Shastriya Manipuri Nartan*. Bombay, kolkata, Imphal: Manipuri Nartyanaloi.
9. Geertz, C. (1973). *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books, Inc, Publishers.
10. Geertz, C. (1973). *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books.
11. Hall, S. (1990). *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*. London: Lawrence & Wishart.
12. Hall, S. (1990). *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*. In S. Hall, *Identity : Community, Culture, Difference* (pp. 222-237). London, England: Lawrence & Wishart.
13. Jhaveri, P. D. (2026, January). Manipuri Dance. (P. R. Das, Interviewer)
14. Kamei, G. (2015). *History of Manipur : Pre- Colonial Period*. New Delhi: Akansha Publishing House.
15. L. Grimes, R. (2004). *Performance Theory and the Study of Ritual*. New York: Walter de Gruyter.
16. Munsu, U. S. (2022). *Becoming a Body*. *South Asian History and Culture*, 1.

17. Sinha, D. R. (2014). Bangladesh Monipuri: Somaj O Songskriti. Shahbag Dhaka, Dhaka, Bangladesh: Mustafa Salim Utso Prokashan.
18. Sinha, S. (2014). Dhrumel project. (Author, Interviewer)
19. Turner, V. (1966). The Ritual Process: Structre and Anti- Structre. New York: Cornell University Press.
20. Turner, V. (1969). The Ritual Process : Structuer and Anti-Structure. Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company.
21. Turner, V. (1969). The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti- Structure. Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company.
22. Turner, V. (1980). Social Drama and Stories about Them. The University Of Chicago Press Journals, 142.
23. Vatsyayan, K. (1997). The Square and the Circle of the Indian Arts. Delhi: Abhinav Publications.
24. Wilson, M. (1954). "Nyakyusa Ritual and Symbolism". American Anthropologist, 241.