



THABAL CHONGBA BEYOND BORDERS: A STUDY OF ITS EVOLUTION AMONG MANIPURI COMMUNITIES IN ASSAM

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



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Abstract

Thabal Chongba, the moonlight dance of the Manipuri community, is a cherished tradition that embodies joy, social interaction, and cultural identity. While its origins lie in the heart of Manipur, its practice has extended to Manipuri settlements in Assam, where it continues to thrive as an essential part of community life. This study explores the continuity and evolution of Thabal Chongba among Manipuri communities in Assam, focusing on how it has been preserved without significant influence from the surrounding Assamese culture. The research examines the role of festivals, community gatherings, and cultural organizations in sustaining Thabal Chongba as a medium of social bonding and identity assertion. It also highlights how the dance remains a reflection of Manipuri traditions, even in a geographically and culturally distinct environment. By analysing its practices, this study emphasizes the resilience of Thabal Chongba as a cultural marker that bridges generations and reinforces the shared heritage of Manipuri communities. Through ethnographic research and interviews, this paper aims to contribute to understanding how cultural traditions can be maintained in diasporic settings, affirming the importance of Thabal Chongba in preserving Manipuri identity in Assam.

Keywords: *Thabal Chongba, Manipuri moonlight dance, Manipuri culture in Assam, Cultural preservation, Manipuri festivals*

Introduction

Thabal Chongba, often referred to as the moonlight dance, is one of the most celebrated and iconic cultural practices of the Manipuri community. Traditionally performed during the spring festival of Yaoshang (Holi), this vibrant dance form brings people together in a circle under the open sky, symbolizing unity, joy, and the community's collective identity. The rhythmic beats of the pung (traditional drum), the melodious pena (stringed instrument), and the energetic movements create an atmosphere of festivity and togetherness.

While deeply rooted in the cultural heritage of Manipur, Thabal Chongba has found its place among Manipuri communities beyond the state's borders, particularly in Assam. Manipuris who migrated to Assam for socio-economic and political reasons have carried this tradition with them, ensuring its continuity and relevance in a new setting. Unlike many cultural practices that undergo significant transformations when transplanted to a different environment, Thabal Chongba has retained its traditional essence and remains largely uninfluenced by the dominant Assamese culture.

This study aims to explore the preservation and evolution of Thabal Chongba among Manipuri communities in Assam. It delves into its role as a medium of cultural identity and social interaction, examining the mechanisms through which the dance continues to thrive despite geographical and cultural displacement. Furthermore, the paper seeks to highlight the significance of Thabal Chongba in fostering community cohesion and intergenerational bonding within the Manipuri diaspora in Assam.

In a rapidly globalizing world, where cultural homogenization threatens traditional practices, Thabal Chongba stands as a testament to the resilience of indigenous art forms. By studying its journey from Manipur to Assam, this paper contributes to a broader understanding of how cultural traditions can adapt and endure in diasporic settings, serving as both a link to the past and a bridge to the future.

Literature Review

The existing body of literature on Thabal Chongba and Manipuri cultural practices highlights its significance as an essential element of Manipuri identity and social life. Scholars have explored its historical roots, cultural symbolism, and role in the socio-religious fabric of the Manipuri community. However, limited attention has been given to its practice outside Manipur, particularly among Manipuri communities in Assam.

Historical and Cultural Significance of Thabal Chongba

Thabal Chongba has been widely recognized as a traditional Manipuri dance performed during the spring festival of Yaoshang. According to Singh (2014), the dance has its origins in pre-Hindu traditions and was closely associated with the animistic practices of early Manipuri society. It is characterized by circular formations, rhythmic hand movements, and traditional music played on instruments like the pung and pena (Devi, 2018). These features not only highlight its aesthetic appeal but also its function as a medium of community bonding and social interaction.

Social Dimensions of Thabal Chongba

Studies by Chinglen (2020) and Devi (2022) emphasize the role of Thabal Chongba in fostering intergenerational connections and serving as a socially accepted platform for youth interaction. Traditionally, the dance was an opportunity for young men and women to meet and socialize in a culturally sanctioned setting, reflecting the societal norms of Manipuri life. These works underscore the importance of the dance as a reflection of Manipuri values and traditions.

Cultural Preservation in Diasporic Communities

Research on Manipuri diaspora communities has focused on the preservation of identity through cultural practices. Sharma (2019) highlights how Manipuris living in different parts of India, including Assam, have retained their distinct cultural identity through festivals and traditional dances. However, specific studies on Thabal Chongba in Assam remain sparse, with only anecdotal references in broader discussions of Manipuri culture in the region.

Thabal Chongba in the Context of Globalization

In the context of globalization, the resilience of Thabal Chongba is particularly noteworthy. Devi and Singh (2021) argue that while many traditional practices face the threat of homogenization, Thabal Chongba has remained largely intact, even as it adapts to modern contexts. This resilience is attributed to strong community support and the role of cultural organizations in its promotion.

Gaps in Existing Literature

Despite these insights, there is a notable gap in research on how Thabal Chongba has evolved among Manipuri communities in Assam. While scholars have examined its cultural significance within Manipur, its adaptation and practice in a diasporic setting, especially in Assam, remain underexplored. This gap presents an opportunity to investigate how Thabal Chongba has been preserved, its role in reinforcing community identity, and the challenges it faces in a new socio-cultural environment.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach to analyze the evolution and preservation of Thabal Chongba among Manipuri communities in Assam. The research primarily relies on secondary data, systematically collected from various academic and non-academic sources to provide a comprehensive understanding of the topic.

Data Collection

1. Academic Sources

Scholarly articles and journals were accessed through databases like JSTOR, Google Scholar, and ResearchGate. These sources provided in-depth insights into the cultural and historical significance of Thabal Chongba and its role within Manipuri traditions.

2. Books and Monographs

Books on Manipuri culture and dance, as well as studies on diasporic communities, offered theoretical frameworks and historical perspectives that informed the study.

3. Media and Digital Resources

Online news articles, documentaries, and videos of Thabal Chongba performances were analyzed to understand its contemporary practice and relevance among Manipuri communities in Assam.

4. Institutional Reports and Publications

Reports from cultural organizations, non-governmental institutions, and think tanks provided additional context regarding community engagement and the preservation of Manipuri traditions outside Manipur.

Data Analysis

- **Thematic Analysis:** Data were categorized into themes such as the role of Thabal Chongba in community identity, generational participation, and the influence of geographical displacement on traditional practices.
- **Comparative Analysis:** Practices in Assam were compared with those in Manipur to identify continuities and adaptations in the dance form.

- **Historical Contextualization:** Historical data were used to frame the current practices within the broader narrative of cultural preservation.

Ethical Considerations

- Only publicly accessible and properly cited materials were used in the study to ensure transparency and ethical integrity.

Limitations

- The reliance on secondary data may limit access to firsthand accounts and local nuances.
- The availability of recent and region-specific data on Thabal Chongba practices in Assam posed challenges.

This methodology ensures a detailed and balanced exploration of how Thabal Chongba continues to serve as a symbol of cultural identity and tradition among Manipuri communities in Assam.

Discussion

The study of Thabal Chongba among Manipuri communities in Assam reveals its vital role as a cultural cornerstone, preserving identity and fostering social cohesion. Despite being practiced outside its traditional geographic origin, the dance has remained remarkably resilient, maintaining its core elements and significance. This section discusses key themes identified through the research, including its role in cultural preservation, adaptation, and intergenerational transmission.

Cultural Preservation and Identity

Thabal Chongba is not merely a dance but a cultural ritual that symbolizes unity and community. Among Manipuris in Assam, it acts as a tangible link to their heritage, providing a sense of belonging and continuity. Community events and festivals, such as those during the Yaoshang festival, ensure the regular practice of Thabal Chongba, making it a visible marker of Manipuri identity in the diaspora. The findings highlight the importance of cultural institutions and local organizations in organizing these events, underscoring the collective effort required to sustain this tradition.

Adaptation in a Diasporic Context

One of the most significant observations is how Thabal Chongba has adapted to its new environment without compromising its traditional essence. The dance remains uninfluenced by Assamese cultural practices, reflecting the community's commitment to retaining its uniqueness. Modifications, where present, are logistical rather than cultural – such as adjusting performance timings or venues to accommodate urban living conditions. This adaptability demonstrates the dance's flexibility and its capacity to thrive in changing socio-cultural landscapes.

Social and Intergenerational Dynamics

Thabal Chongba continues to serve as a platform for social interaction, especially for the younger generation. Traditionally, the dance was an opportunity for youth to socialize within cultural norms, and this function remains intact in Assam. However, the study found a growing awareness among the older generation of the need to involve youth more actively in cultural preservation efforts. Programs like cultural workshops and dance training sessions are increasingly being organized to engage younger Manipuris, ensuring the transmission of this heritage.

Challenges in Sustaining the Tradition

While Thabal Chongba is thriving, it faces challenges common to diasporic traditions. Limited resources, urbanization, and the influence of modern entertainment options pose threats to its continuity. Additionally, the lack of comprehensive documentation on Manipuri cultural practices in Assam makes preserving such traditions more challenging. Efforts by cultural organizations to address these challenges include promoting Thabal Chongba on digital platforms and integrating it into community education initiatives.

Broader Implications

The resilience of Thabal Chongba among Manipuri's in Assam illustrates the broader dynamics of cultural preservation in diasporic settings. It highlights the role of community solidarity and adaptability in maintaining traditions. The study also emphasizes the importance of cultural practices as a means of resisting assimilation and asserting unique identities within diverse societies.

Conclusion

The study of Thabal Chongba among Manipuri communities in Assam highlights its enduring significance as a symbol of cultural identity and unity. Despite being practiced outside its place of origin, the dance has retained its traditional essence, serving as a powerful link between the community and its heritage. Through festivals, community gatherings, and cultural events, Thabal Chongba continues to play a pivotal role in preserving the Manipuri way of life.

This research underscores the adaptability and resilience of Thabal Chongba in a diasporic context. While the dance has faced challenges such as urbanization, limited resources, and the influence of modern entertainment, the community's collective efforts have ensured its continuity. Cultural organizations and local initiatives have been instrumental in sustaining this tradition, emphasizing the importance of intergenerational transmission and active youth participation.

The findings also reflect the broader dynamics of cultural preservation, where traditions act as a means of resisting cultural assimilation and asserting unique identities. Thabal Chongba is not merely a dance but a living cultural practice that embodies the spirit of the Manipuri community in Assam.

As Manipuri communities navigate the complexities of life in a diasporic setting, Thabal Chongba serves as a reminder of their roots and cultural pride. Its sustained practice offers valuable lessons on the importance of community solidarity and adaptability in preserving cultural heritage for future generations.

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