Crossings between Regional and National Culture in the work of Imphal-based choreographer, Surjit Nongmeikapam

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Introduction

When I arrived in Imphal, Manipur, for the first time on August 16, 2022, I was asked to fill a form termed "Inner Line Permit."[1] The ILP (Figure 1) allows non-residents of Manipur a legal stay for up to fifteen days from the time of their arrival. This felt quite strange to me—taking a permit to visit a place in my own country and being called a "non-resident." I am used to being categorized as a "non-resident alien" in the United States and being asked to take timely visa permits to (re)enter the country, but I felt displaced when I was assigned a similar status in my home country.

Generally speaking, I am skeptical of permits. I see them as modes of surveillance, and that makes me afraid. Yes, they are required to keep us "safe," but they are usually used as modes of discrimination, segregation, and oppression. Artist Tania El Khoury (2021) urges us to "address borders as violence, which connects the right to movement with the responsibility and positionality of people who are border privileged, those who are not criminalized for crossing borders" (19). Likewise, how might we see this kind of border control as a right to self-preservation for the indigenous communities of Manipur?

Originally instituted "by the British under the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulations Act, 1873," writes Sumir Karmakar (23 June 2022) for the Deccan Herald, the ILP was re-introduced in December 2019 to distinguish "native residents" from "illegal migrants" in the state of Manipur. Later, I learnt that ILP was implemented after tensions and violence between the Meitei community and the Naga tribes, with the Naga-nationalist demand for "a greater Nagalim—the idea of a common homeland for people from various Naga tribes to be carved out of Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, and Myanmar, in addition to the territory of the real state of Nagaland."[2] I began to understand Manipur's need to establish its regional autonomy as a border state between India and Myanmar, along with the three other states in the Northeast that implemented ILP before Manipur—Mizoram, Nagaland, and Arunachal Pradesh. I also started paying attention to the terms of agreement between Manipur's three main ethnic tribes—Meitei, Kuki, and Naga. However, I constantly wondered how India's forceful measures for "national unity" impacted Manipur's need for regional independence and contributed to the ethnic conflict in Manipur.

In this paper, I discuss and analyze the *choreosomatic* practice[3] of Imphal-based

1 Regarding Inner Line Permit (ILP), Sumir Karmakar (June 23, 2022) writes for Deccan Herald, "The BJP government in Manipur has decided to adopt 1961 as the 'base year' to determine the state's 'native residents' for implementation of the Inner Line Permit (ILP) system in the state." Read more at: https://www.deccanherald.com/india/manipur-adopts-1961-as-base-year-to-determine-native-residents-for-ilp-implementation-1120454.html.

2 Quoted from photo-journalist Nikhil Roshan's unpublished essay that he shared with me during my field-trip in Imphal, India in 2022.

3 I am defining and using the term "choreosomatic" in reference to Surjit Nongmeikapam's work to give an overview of his somatic, pedagogical, and choreographic practice. Essentially, I do not see them as separate forms of practice, in Nongmeikapam's case, rather porous systems of movement generation and organization with varied crossings between them. Throughout the paper, when I am emphasizing on one aspect of his work, I will clarify

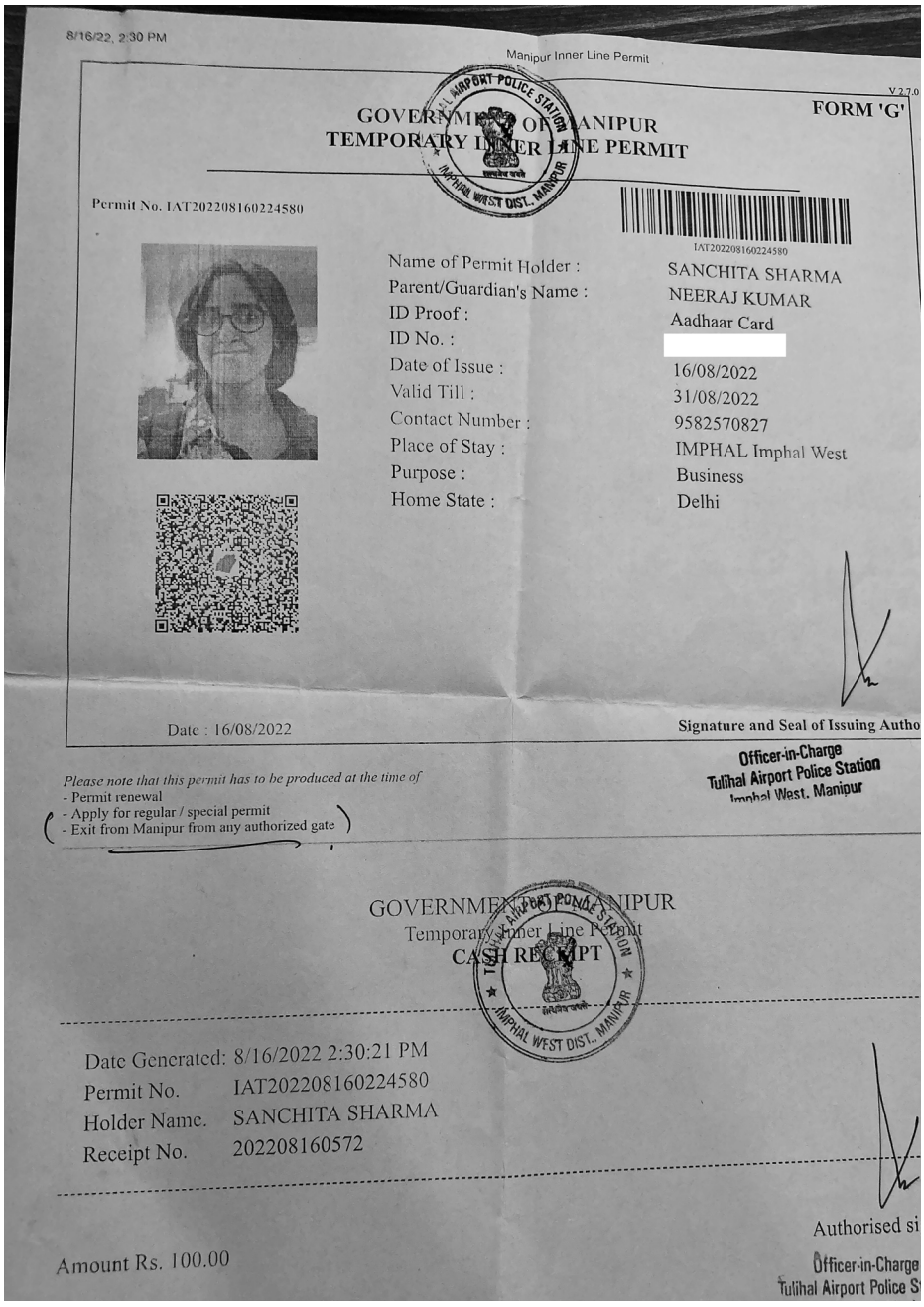

Figure 1. Photo of the first Inner Line Permit I received at Imphal Airport on August 16, 2022

choreographer, Surjit Nongmeikapam, who is a member of the Meitei community, one of the predominant indigenous communities and ethnic groups in Manipur, India. Nongmeikapam's choreographies address the conflict between the nation-state and the north-eastern region, and the psychophysical impacts State oppression has had on the indigenous people, especially the youth. Through my ethnographic observations, qualitative interview with the choreographer, and "thick descriptions" (Geertz 1973), in this paper, I suggest that Nongmeikapam's choreosomatic practice is an offering, a methodology for deep resistance towards the forced Hinduization and Indianization of the region. I show how his conception of the "natural body" empowers and foregrounds a culturally embodied regional identity (Manipuri) that is contemporary. The "natural body" becomes an agent of indigenous resistivity to undo the oppressive colonial and post-colonial conceptions of body, space, and sovereignty. By taking a closer look, as a participant-observer, at Nongmeikapam's improvisation-based pedagogical practice entitled the *Yangshak* Movement, I show how Nongmeikapam's work fosters harmonious, equitable, and reciprocal relations between the body and the land, building on regional philosophy and movement practices.

Making multiple crossings between internal and external, regional and national, religious and indigenous, and local and global borders, form, and culture, Nongmeikapam's choreosomatic practice not only reclaims regional representation but also produces a new framework for regional and ethnic autonomy and freedom. This process, I argue, could usefully be called *resistive hybridity*, because of the way it resists the exoticization of the north-eastern body in performance. Nongmeikapam's *resistive hybridity* integrates physical techniques from a diverse range of movement traditions, which I delve into more detail later in the paper, to create corporeal, sonic, and spatial landscapes that are rooted in local Manipuri sensibilities yet are both abstract and ritualistic in nature. Belonging to a marginalized state in India, *resistive hybridity* reflects Nongmeikapam's resistance to being engulfed in the category of "folk" dance, only to be recognized for the "diversity" he brings to Indian dance, without being credited for the innovation and originality that he brings to the field of Indian contemporary dance.

Theoretical Framework

In laying out the theoretical framework for this paper, I discuss two key concepts—"indigenous structural framework" (Premchand 2005) and "geo-body" (Winichakul 1994). In doing that, I aim to show the history of development of cultural art forms such as theatre and dance in Manipur as an act of negotiation between regional and (trans) national culture. In contrast to the mainland's customs and rituals which are primarily Hindu, Manipuri cultural art forms foreground a local and indigenous understanding of their customs, rituals, and movement practices that connected to their land. Seeing the resultant art form as a hybridized product,[4] in this section, "indigenous structural framework" (Premchand 2005) allows us to trace the exchange between the local and non-religious practices in conversation with myths and themes from Hinduism. The discussion on

by saying pedagogical and/or choreographic practice. Otherwise, when you come across the term "choreosomatic," it is meant to fulfill the purpose of looking at Nongmeikapam's work in totality—always in relation and in dialogue with his ethnic and regional context.

4 I will discuss this further in relation to Surjit Nongmeikapam's work, explaining how his pedagogical and choreographic practice engages in a process that could usefully be called *resistive hybridity*.

"geo-body" (Winichakul 1994), on the one hand, destabilizes the colonial notion of nation and territory and, on the other, shows how the performance culture of Manipur is rooted in its understanding of and connection to the land. Overall, these two key ideas help me critically examine Nongmeikapam's pedagogical and choreographic framework—his improvisational strategies and the spatial politics in his work—in the second half of the paper.

Manipuri scholar and theatre activist, Nongthomban Premchand (2005), argues for indigenous rituals and performance traditions of Manipur to be considered as theatre. Keeping in mind the social, cultural, and political factors specific to Manipur and how it has shaped theatre over the years, he draws a relationship between the changes in ritualistic performances and the dominating religion in the region. In doing so, Nongthombon writes, "The history of development or changes from *Lai Haroba* to *Shumang Lila* has been dictated by the changes which have taken place in the life of Manipuris, starting from the days of pre-Hindu indigenous religion continuing [to] the days of Hinduism and finally to the era of secularism" (3). In mapping these shifts in ritualistic performances from historical to the present moment, Premchand outlines the "indigenous structural framework" (4) as the base for traditional Manipuri theatre.

> This non-religious indigenous structure, which is composed of the elements of music, song, dance, body movements, costume, space, and even the relationship between the performance and audience, is the backbone or the central nervous system, which has transcended barriers of culture or religion, and which has drawn all the foreign materials into a process of interaction and final fusion with local Manipuri conditions and sensibilities. (4-5)

The unique usage of these above-mentioned elements in performance reflects the process of merging of "foreign" and "indigenous" practices. By foreign materials, Premchand refers to topics or themes from Hinduism that have merged with "local and indigenous materials and sensibilities" (4). The "fusion" between these two cultures has transformed the ways in which Manipuri theatre exists today. According to Premchand, "indigenous structural framework" is non-religious and has "transcended barriers of religion and culture" (4).

This process of interaction and fusion of Hindu and indigenous sensibilities in ritualistic performances can be further understood through the formulation of Manipuri Vaishnavism,[5] the synthesis of Bengali Vaishnavism and pre-Hindu Meitei religion. In his article "Sacred Geography,"[6] journalist and photographer Nikhil Roshan analyzes two major festivals of Manipur—*Lai Haroba*[7] and *Yaoshang*—to argue that their

5 "Manipur Hinduism gradually became a synthesis of the old Methei religion with its Gods and Goddesses and Myths, its Legends and Traditions, its Social Customs and Usages and its Priests and Ceremonials, and of Brahminical Hinduism with its special worship of Radha and Krishna" (Parratt 1980, x).

6 Photo-journalist Nikhil Roshan shared his unpublished photo-essay with me during my field research in India in 2022.

7 "Lai haraoba is a ritual celebrating the 'cosmic union between male and female deities' and an enactment of the creation of the universe, including the 'stars, sky, sun, moon, and the creation of men'. There are four versions; the one performed in and around Imphal is 'regarded as the core ritual [of the Meiteis], reflecting the Meitei belief systems and philosophy'. Lai haraoba was banned during the forced adoption of Hinduism, but in the second half of the twentieth century it has been performed more often as 'a means to remind the Meiteis of

current forms are a result of "The unique cross pollination of belief systems that is Manipuri Vaishnavism." Roshan foregrounds theatre director and scholar Dr. Lokendra Arambam's astute analysis and argument to look at these ritualistic performances as possibly "the Meteisation of Hinduism,"[8] which is similar to the process of "fusion" that Premchand refers to in the formulation of "indigenous structural framework."

Looking closer at these ritualistic performances, one can see the fusion between these two distinct religious and cultural philosophies and worldviews. According to Premchand, "indigenous structural framework" can be identified by studying "the use of the existing non-Hindu performance structures, which are abstract, non-realistic and ritualistic in character" (5). In these ritualistic performances, for example in *Lai Haroba*, their performance structures echo "a regional cosmology and worldview, in contradistinction to a 'mainland' world view, and a reminder about what is at stake in debates over regional and national culture" (Mee 2011, 122-123). In other performances, for example *Maha Raas* or *Rasleela*, Manipuris (Meiteis) kept their rituals, customs, and movement patterns and accommodated the themes of Hinduism, including only the storyline worshiping Hindu Gods, Radha and Krishna. In this way, *Rasleela* became "a hybrid genre designed to bring about cultural reconciliation" (Mee 2011, 124-125). Looking through the "indigenous structural framework," one can see the process of synthesis and negotiation between Hindu and Meitei belief systems to form a contemporary regional culture. Therefore, using "indigenous structural framework" to study Nongmeikapam's work, I analyze his strategic use of different belief systems and movement practices to create his concept of the body, his pedagogical practice, and choreographic structure that has regional origin.

As Nongmeikapam identifies as an indigenous member of the Meitei community, his work also embodies a politics of space and belonging. In the case of Manipur, modern geographical discourse of space and nationhood stands in contradiction to indigenous conceptions of space and sovereignty. This could be seen through the difference in the understanding of territoriality and boundary in modern and indigenous realms expressed through the notion of the "geo-body."

According to Thongchai Winichakul (1994), "geo-body" "describes the operations of the technology of territoriality which created nationhood spatially" (16). The modern concept of territoriality, according to Winichakul, "involves three basic human behaviours: a form of classification by area, a form of communication by boundary and an attempt at enforcing" (16). Through classifying an area and enforcing a boundary over it, the geo-body introduced the concept of bounded territories and altered the relationship between the space and the body. This was in contrast to the indigenous understanding of non-boundedness of human geography. The map became an "active mediator" between the body and the space instead of being a "transparent medium" (Winichakul 1994, 130). Through the technology of mapping, according to Winichakul, nations were created and people

[the] origin of their distinct cultural and political unity' and as a challenge to Hinduism. As one scholar put it: 'Lai Haraoba mirrors the entire culture of the Manipur people'. Clearly this is an embodiment, display, and reminder of a regional cosmology and world view, in contradistinction to a 'mainland' world view, and a reminder about what is at stake in debates over regional and national culture" (Mee 2011, 122-123).

8 In an interview with Rodney Sebastian on September 10, 2011, at Imphal, Manipur, for his PhD dissertation (2019), Lokendra Arambam "referred to this phenomenon as 'Meeteziation (sic) of Hinduism' instead of 'Hinduization of Meitei'" (176).

were transformed into "agents" that actualized the space being mapped (130).

In the context of Manipur, Vibha Arora and Ngamjahao Kipgen (2012) reminds us that "The physical boundary of Manipur has been fluctuating with historical changes in political power and intra-state and the inter-state boundaries" (430).[9] In contrast to these shifting borders, the Meitei people's pre-colonial notion of territoriality is based on the relationship between human body and geography of the land. According to Lokendra Arambam, the Manipuri people believe that the land forms an "anthropomorphic geobody" (Roshan). In his article, "Land and Ethnicity: A study of Manipur and its neighbourhood," Arambam (2018) writes,

> The Meitei concept of territoriality was also of a different cultural vintage. The hills and valleys, which constituted the geo-body of the pre-colonial nation state, were homologous with the body of a human organism. When the Meitei developed its polity in the eighteenth century, they had incorporated all the hills and plains as vital limbs of the human body that symbolized the geography of the land. Mythic beliefs were incorporated into their visions of land, people and cultures as an organic, moving national consciousness. The Meitei believed the hills of Koubru in the Northwestern sector as the head of the organism. The Lamphel marshes in the valley were regarded as the breasts. The Kangla (Imphal the Capital) was the navel of the organism, which gave intelligence and nourishment to the body. Loktak Lake in the Southwestern plains was regarded as the bowels and pelvic zone of the geo-body. The Imphal River at its rear-end and before it fell into the Chindwin in Myanmar was regarded as the rectum. The hills were the arms and legs of the organism. (130)

Indigenous spatiality is described in the ways in which indigenous people of Manipur imagine the land as a human body. Imagining the land or geography as one having human-like physiology and characteristics challenges the hegemonic and modern notion of space (and its division through boundaries and organization into territories) produced through the geo-body. For the people of Manipur, it also creates a "national consciousness" directly linked to the land rather than their forced inclusion in the modern nation-state (India).

Thinking through the indigenous concept of the geo-body helps me foreground the concept of the "natural body" in Nongmeikapam's work "as an organic, moving national consciousness" (Arambam 2018, 130). As I discuss later, the "natural body"—as a source of regional consciousness and ethnic autonomy—is depicted through Nongmeikapam's use of the spine. The spine maps and traces the movement pattern of *Pakhangba*, the God-king of the Meitei people and symbol of Manipuri nationalism, which in turn, links the "natural body" directly to the land and Meitei culture.

9 "Historically, Manipur was an independent kingdom ruled by the Meitei dynasty. The physical boundary of Manipur has been fluctuating with historical changes in political power and intra-state and the inter-state boundaries. At one time in history, the river Chindwin in Myanmar formed Manipur's natural eastern frontier. The boundary line between Burma (Myanmar) and Manipur was fixed by the provision of the Treaty of Yandaboo in 1826 (Sanajaoba 1995: 1; N.J. Singh 2002: 17; Phanjou bam 2003: 220). The Kabaw valley remained the disputed territory of two countries - Manipur and Burma (Myanmar) - until Manipur joined India (Sanajaoba 1995: 2). Manipur formally joined India as a 'C' state in 1949 and was administered by the President of India through the Chief Commissioner. In 1956, it became a Union Territory and, in 1972, it was given statehood (O.B. Singh 2007-08: i)" (Arora and Kipgen 2012, 430).

The Natural Body[10]

What is the relationship between borders, territoriality, and mobility? How does the concept of the "natural body" help us understand this relationship, especially, in the context of Manipur?

According to Winichakul, "a frontier or border is a zone which lies along *each side* of the boundary or interfaces a neighboring country—that is, a boundary is *in between* two sides of borders" (77). Contrary to the modern definition of boundary, in indigenous understanding of spatial relations, borders, margins, and frontiers are conceived as "shared" or "overlapping" (101). The boundary is not neatly placed between the two sides of the borders but rather converges and blurs these borders. It is through taking in consideration the bodily movement or body's mobility across these borders that borders can be perceived as overlapping between different nation-states (instead of dividing them in the modern understanding of the border/boundary).

Similarly for Noel B. Salazar & Alan Smart (2011), "Mobilities and borders are not antithetical" (iv). Borders prioritize mobility (Chalfin 2008, 525) and they also "promote immobility, exclusion, and disconnection" (Alvarz 1995; Tsing 2005 cited in Salazar and Smart 2011, iv). Salazar and Smart (2011) argue that "To assess the extent or nature of movement, or, indeed, even 'observe' it sometimes, one needs to spend a lot of time studying things that stand still: the borders, institutions, and territories of nation-states, and the sedimented 'home' cultures of those that do not move" (iv-v). Taking into consideration the stillness and motion across borders and territories, the natural body studies the relationship between mobility and immobility, deepening into the physical sensations of (the body in) flux vs. (the body in) stillness. In doing so, it blurs the distinction between the two—finding stillness and motion in both these physical states: flux and fixity.

In Nongmeikapam's work, the natural body embodies indigenous and regional cosmology and world views, the anthropomorphic understanding of the land, geography, and region. The label of the "natural" signifies an understanding of the local culture, knowledge, and sensibilities about the body and the land, a resistive tactic, that guides his pedagogical and choreographic process to uplift and foreground Meitei philosophy and knowledge of the body as tied to land, culture, and nature.[11] It counters the modern understanding of borders and territoriality, and how the body negotiates the rules of sanctioned mobility. Thus, the "natural body" becomes an agent of indigenous resistivity to undo the oppressive colonial and post-colonial conceptions of body, space, and sovereignty that forcefully includes and "others" the region and the people of Manipur. This is the body that can survive,

10 In contradiction to my analysis of the natural body in Surjit Nongmeikapam's practice, a study on the concept of the natural body has been done by Doran George (2020) in reference to late twentieth-century contemporary dancers' resistance to ballet and modern dance's oppressive training regime in the United States. Developing on the work of Susan Manning's (2004), Ananya Chatterjea's (2004b), and Brenda Dixon Gottschild's (1996) anti-racist frameworks, George argue how whiteness functions and/or is embodied in the construction of the "natural body." Although Somatics claimed itself to be an inclusive practice and liberatory for many white practitioners, George highlight that it marked, marginalized, and excluded people of color, non-western, transgender, and differently abled bodies and their ways of movement from Somatics' universal purview. However, I show that instead of using the "natural" to re-invoke a "pre-cultural body" in the case of 1970s US Somatic practitioners (George 2020), Nongmeikapam uses it to empower and foreground a culturally embodied regional identity (Manipuri) that is contemporary.

11 In an interview with Annette Leday (2021), Surjit Nongmeikapam shares that he "learns from nature" and that the "human body is nature too."

push through, and transform even though experiencing oppression from the authoritarian nation-state that racially discriminates against it. Furthermore, Nongmeikapam uses it to empower and foreground a culturally embodied regional identity (Manipuri) that is contemporary. Nongmeikapam believes in cultivating a hopeful future for indigenous people and claims that "we cannot forget our history" but we can configure how "we can start a new life" together.[12]

Thang-ta to *Yangshak*: Moving Towards *Resistive Hybridity*

Nongmeikapam significantly draws on the symbol of *Pakhangba* in creating his movement patterns and choreographic structures. *Pakhangba*,[13] the serpentine dragon, is one of Meitei's deities. He was Sanamahi's brother who was worshiped by the Meitei community before they were forced to adopt Hinduism. Sanamahism is the pre-Hindu religion that the Meitei community practiced, which is "a mix of shamanism, with female shamans in the forefront of the ritual proceedings; and animism, which holds all of earth, and especially the waters, sacred."[14] There is currently a youth movement in Manipur to revive Sanamahism.

The image of *Pakhangba* has become the image of the Manipuri nationalist movement (Figure 2). According to Erin B. Mee (2011), the image of the deity was "first used by the underground (those fighting for independence) and is now part of the state's emblem" (111). Nongmeikapam is inspired by the infinite continuity represented by the symbol of Meitei's deity, *Pakhangba*. The visual pattern of the snake swallowing its tail represents for him the concept of reincarnation where the journey of life (and in his practice, the journey of movement) has no clear beginning or end (blurring). The relevance of referencing *Pakhangba* in performance is a way to revive pre-Hindu Meitei religion and its cosmology and worldview. It is also a tactic to resist the forced Hinduization and Indianization of the region.[15]

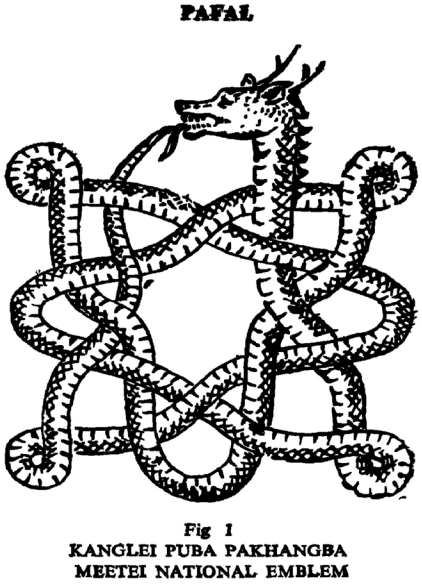

Figure 2. Image of Pakhangba. Accessed on May 29, 2025.

12 Annette Leday and Surjit Nongmeikapam, 2021, "Dance India Today: In conversation with Surjit Nongmeikapam," Narthaki Official, March 21, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4MGFqy7JrPI&list=PLawHnK-B4UjotvTtPFU7mD42FEq2ac_nDo&index=5.

13 "Pakhangba was the first ruler of Manipur, and is revered as kind, ancestors of the royal family the Meitei clan, and deity" (Mee 2011, 111).

14 "Sacred Space, the Maibis of Manipur," July 19, 2019, https://dharma-documentaries.net/sacred-space-the-maibis-of-manipur.

15 Scholars have theorized the forced inclusion of the north-eastern state, Manipur, in India where Manipur was seen only as a geographical region to be assimilated into the fold of mainland India for economic advantages (Arambam 2018; Arora and Kipgen 2012; Chawla 2023; D'Souza 2018; Singh 2011, among others). They also see a correlation between Manipur's forced merger into the Indian nation-state and rising ethnic conflict between the hill tribes, Kuki-Zo, Nagas, and the valley-residing Meitei community in Manipur that continues to shape the ethnic landscape in the region.

Another one of Nongmeikapam's strategies is to engage with one of Manipur's oldest martial arts forms, *thang-ta*. *Thang-ta* is a Manipuri martial arts form which was practiced in warfare before it was outlawed by the British. It means the "art of the sword and the spear" (Mee 2011, 120). According to Mee (2011), *thang-ta* "is embedded in a larger cultural context: it embodies and expresses ways of thinking and teaches an in-body understanding of Meitei culture" (120). As a movement practice, *thang-ta* foregrounds Meitei's way of thinking through the body. It theorizes and teaches bodily awareness as rooted in a somatic-based understanding of Meitei culture.

These are the physical principles that I learned from *thang-ta* during my field research in 2022—connecting with the body's center of gravity, grounded footwork, ability to switch spatial location, quick weight-shifts or weight-transfers, ability to take space, and rhythmic movements, from arm movements to footwork. These physical principles, attributes or qualities, are learned from deconstructing anatomical structure and studying the range of movement. According to Mee (2011), *thang-ta* exercises "teach control over the flow of energy in the body, coordination of inner and outer awareness, activation and coordination of all body parts, focus and concentration, opposition in the body, and kinesthetic response" (120). I saw the initial glimpse of the presence or influence of thang-ta in Nongmeikapam's choreosomatic practice during an improvisation session where he offered Bicky and me a movement phrase (Figure 3).

The phrase that this excerpt refers to combines movement principles from thang-ta and the curves and shapes etched by the symbol of *Pakhangba*. Feet are grounded, drawing up earth's energy through the soles. The spine is soaking up that energy to hint the head to move on a curvature (S) and arms join in and externalize these shapes (the s's and the infinity) through their movement—leading the rising, falling, and change of bodily orientation.

With *thang-ta*'s close and inevitable association and reading as a "symbol of Manipuri culture," (Mee 2011, 122), Nongmeikapam's usage of the practice strengthens his connection to his Manipuri roots. The use of *thang-ta* and *Pakhangba* creates a somatic and felt sense of his regional identity and autonomy. However, Nongmeikapam skillfully transitions from his embodiment of his regional philosophical and movement traditions towards an investigation of these forms and traditions to create his movement practice, *Yangshak*—core example of how he performs his *resistive hybridity* through his work.

In his pedagogical practice, *Yangshak*, the somatic and sensory knowledge that thang-ta imparts is still available and embodied by the dancers and so is the knowledge of incarnation from the symbol of Meitei's deity, *Pakhangba*. However, on a choreographic level, both the form and the symbol are abstracted to extend beyond a visual representation of traditional Manipuri culture. To clarify how this transition happens on a corporeal level, in the following section, I delve deeper into Nongmeikpam's pedagogical practice, *Yangshak*, adding in felt experiences and observations from my field-research in 2022.

Yangshak **Movement**

The description of the *Yangshak* Movement to promote the workshop on Instagram reads as follows:

> Yangshak movement is an exploration of the philosophy of 'Lairen Mathek' of the Manipuri martial arts forms, Thang-ta (Khuthek Lal Thek), and Dance (Jagoi).

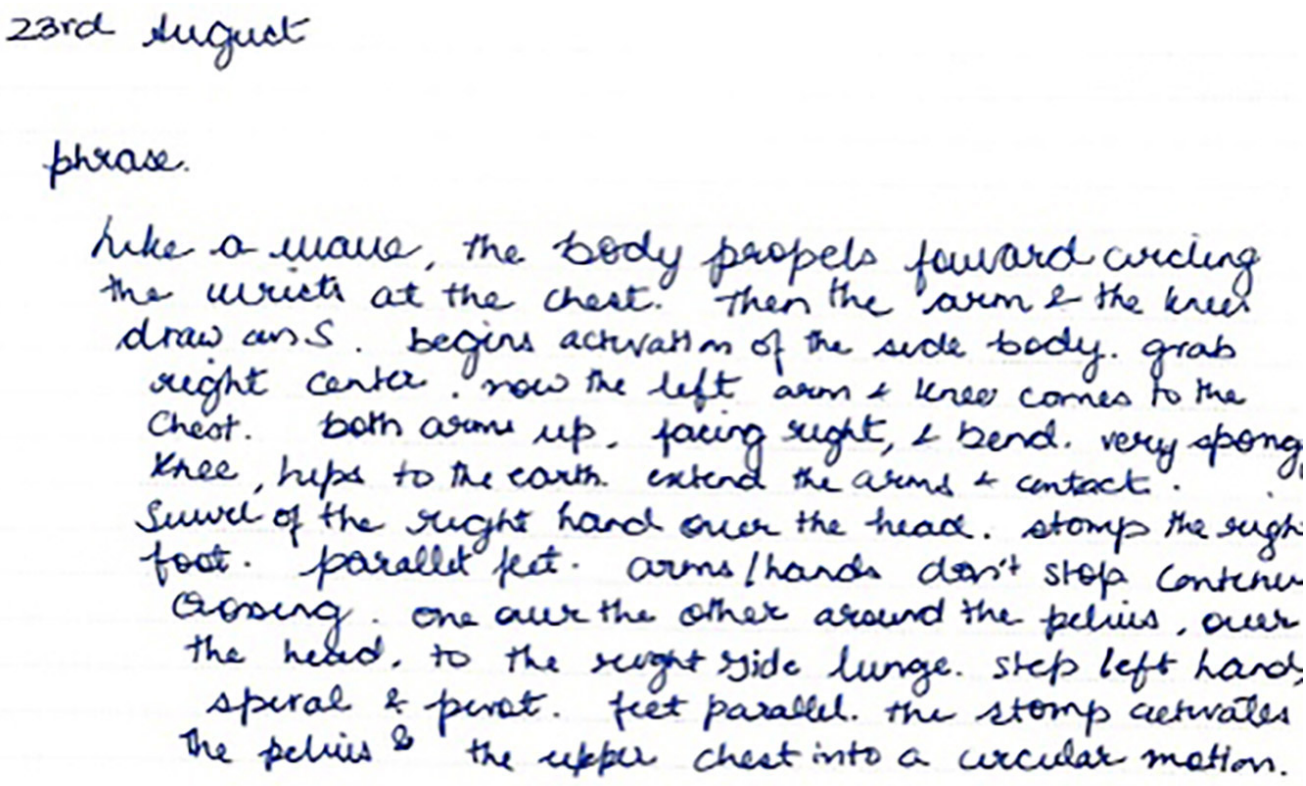

Figure 3: Excerpt from my field notes, written on August 23, 2022

> The workshop will focus on building an in-depth understanding of our body with the help of our imagination, resonance, impulse, and objects.[16]

I encountered Nongmeikapam's pedagogical practice during a week-long workshop he organized in Imphal in September 2022. During the workshop, Nongmeikapam shared that he is interested in bringing the inner form and the outer shape together, instead of creating a bodily shape that is fully comprehensible and hence, capturable. According to him, "Yang means Spine (internal) and Shak means image (external)."[17] In his practice, he focuses on developing a relationship between the external image (what we see) and the internal form (what we feel).

The questions Nongmeikapam is concerned with in this practice is: How to observe the body? How to cultivate awareness of the internal form? To discover answers to these questions, he has developed a two-way approach (inside-out and outside-in). Since *Yangshak* for him is the coming together of the internal and external, it is important to cultivate awareness inside-out on one hand (through training and warm-up exercises) and outside-in on the other hand (through working with an external object). In both these approaches, he focuses on improvisation as a tool to develop an anti-representational aesthetic and employs embodiment-sensitive (centered) language.

In cultivating crossings between internal and external form, Nongmeikapam's motto is to make unseen work visible.[18] He connects with impulses and sensations within the body to awaken (the natural) body's way of thinking. He rotates and breathes into every joint to show his "appreciation of each joint."[19] While learning to play with speed, slow and fast tempo, momentum, and quick weight-shifts, the dancing body becomes aware of its extremities, limitations, and movement possibilities in space. It learns to be responsive and care-ful to internal and external impulses and triggers, tapping into a sense of readiness and a willingness to change.

For Nongmeikapam, "Movement is body expression. It's a universal way. It is not about beauty. Every movement, simple movement, is so bold."[20] He focuses on "simplifying the movement,"[21] breaking a movement down to the smallest of its parts and bringing attention, energy, and aliveness to those parts. In this way, he moves away from a beautiful and perfected representation of a movement to enhancing the dancers' ability to sense and feel the movement from within. Improvisational methods that help generate this awareness in the body are a) (Un)balancing, b) Visualization, and c) Internalizing with the Object.

(Un)balancing

This practice tests one's knowledge of alignment. It involves learning to balance and build focus by imposing a physical restriction or challenge.

Tracing the right arm with our eyes, we pick up the right leg up and bring the knee to the chest. Focusing on a moving limb, balance is tested; the connection between the two—focus and balance—is ignited. On relevé, arms are raised

16 Instagram post (August 20, 2022): https://www.instagram.com/p/ChflCWQh8Fk/.
17 Interviewed by the author on August 24, 2022, in Imphal, Manipur.
18 In an informal conversation with the author on August 30, 2022, Surjit Nongmeikapam mentioned that he wishes to focus on "unseen culture."
19 Interviewed by the author on August 24, 2022, in Imphal, Manipur.
20 Ibid.
21 Ibid.

overhead. We focus on a point in front and close our eyes, still keeping an unwavering focus on that point. This strengthens the internal-external connection.

Later, with grounded and earthy feet, we tip our bodily weight to the edges of our feet. Experiencing the sensation of falling and then (re)organizing our internal systems to bring back alignment and stability, a new form is achieved. This form is not attained by a firm/rigid outward instruction or by following a codified technique. It is inspired by the concept of reincarnation, the continual and connected change in bodily form. It builds on the resonance of the previous movement and connects with the occurring impulses in the body to move into a novel direction/alignment. This process is constant and repetitive.

Visualization

In this exploration, we connect with physical sensations and geometric shapes that are imagined to move through our bodies.

During an improvisational practice in the studio prior to the workshop, Nongmeikapam asks us not only to focus on our breaths but also to "Think of each part of our body as if they were our lungs."[22] The shoulder breathes, the ribcage and the pelvis, and so does the calves, the back, the elbows, and the forehead. The entire body is expanding and contracting, like the lungs, filling itself with air one moment and emptying air out the next moment. Through this constant cycle of inhalation and exhalation, the movement feels continuous, like the movement of the serpent-God.

Then, we are asked to embody the geometrical shape of number eight (8), similar to the infinity symbol which is the base for Manipuri indigenous religious beliefs and martial arts, *thang-ta*. We envision it to move through our bodies and evolve into different shapes—from two interconnected circles to a rectangle, triangle, and so on. Nongmeikapam encourages us to trace the infinity symbol using the mobility of our spines while keeping the head and tailbone connection intact. Drawing different ranges of the number 8—small, large, growing out of our bodies—the design spills and integrates in the space around us, the room reverberates with our movement patterns.

Internalizing with the Object

To test our bodily awareness, towards the end of the *Yangshak* workshop, Nongmeikapam brings bamboo in the studio. For him, the act of holding an external object can help us connect with or become conscious of our alignment, internal feelings, and sensations, and bring us closer to the present moment.[23] Being born and raised in New Delhi and its chaos, I remember thinking, do I belong in the same space as the bamboo? Isn't it supposed to be in a faraway land, somewhere in a serene forest? I was just amazed to see how overpowering this object was and how, casually and unapologetically, it demanded, commanded, occupied, and divided space.

A breath later, I feel my anxiety rise as we begin to work with the bamboo—as it forces us to be present, attentive, and mobile in ways that we weren't accustomed to. The workshop participants stand on either side of the bamboo. One dancer in the center holds the bamboo

22 Interviewed by the author on August 24, 2022, in Imphal, Manipur.

23 "Since the bamboo is the external and the movement, the philosophy, is the internal. So external and coming together like that. Like, if I hold this is external thing, I'm connecting with my internal, inside the feelings. Then, you know, I'm moving, and I have the connection, the presence, the times, and conscious is here. I'm into the times and into the moment. The presence is very important" (Nongmeikapam, Interviewed by the author on August 24, 2022).

and turns on his axis slowly. Nongmeikapam asks us to enter the circle one by one and exchange the bamboo.

First things first, we think about how to handle the bamboo's weight, form, and momentum. I quickly observe and learn that when I go in to receive the bamboo, I need to tune into the momentum of the bamboo—this meant assessing not only the pace of the other person holding/turning the bamboo but also making simultaneous micro-adjustments in my own stride to move as close as possible to the bamboo holder. Then, make firm contact with the bamboo—grasp/clutch the bamboo with both hands—and continue to move on my central axis (avoid stopping/pausing) and keep the flow going to make the transfer as smooth as possible.

So now, as it is my turn to hold the bamboo in the center, I begin to turn on my axis, I feel disconnected, I feel disjointed; I feel as if my hands were turning the bamboo, and my feet are turning my body. Nongmeikapam reminds us that it is the spine that moves everything together. This helps me stay in center and not let the bamboo waver in space. My feet and the bamboo begin to move in coordination. I exit. The next time I run in, I run towards the edge of the bamboo, and it quickly catches up with my stride. It scares me, it suddenly becomes harder to catch up, especially when I start walking backwards and I can see it catching up with me rather quickly. I feel the panic sensations rise in my body. This realization that there is a real obstruction/obstacle moving my way and I need to do something about it immediately, otherwise I will get hit, changes something within me. I freeze for a moment. Then, I take more risks even if I am afraid. I try harder to further understand my bodily rhythm and that too of the bamboo and my co-dancers in space.

From this experience in the studio, I learnt that there is deep resistance and potential for cultivating hope and resilience, in being vulnerable, in facing danger, in crossing between internal-external worlds, which is what I believe Nongmeikapam's pedagogical practice aims to do. The body that he proposes is *retrained* in indigenous and regional knowledge. It learns to build focus and balance itself by exposing itself to a physical restriction. It connects with internal sensations and spatial patterns, most importantly as guided by regional, indigenous, and ethnic cosmology and worldview. I illustrate this further in the section below with my choreographic analysis of Nongmeikapam's earlier work, *One Voice* (2011).

One Voice: Processing Cultural Trauma and Resisting State Violence

As a dance movement therapist, after completing his certificate course from Kolkata Sanved in 2010, Nongmeikapam worked with various NGOs to help people who were HIV+ and people with mental health disorders. Through this experience—using movement to communicate with people experiencing trauma—Nongmeikapam learnt to work with movement in a therapeutic way, and it inspired him to create a solo-work, *One Voice* (2011).[24]

One Voice is a reflection on the experience of torture. Nongmeikapam addresses torture, as a material and tangible sensation, that has shaped the everyday reality of the people of Manipur for a long time. He choreographs various ways in which torture constricts and challenges body's mobility through manipulation, submission, and resistance. He incorporates philosophy from Meitei religion,

24 *One Voice* (2011) was created during Surjit Nongmeikapam's Gati Summer Dance Residency (GSDR) at the Gati Dance Forum and premiered at Shri Ram Center at Mandi House, Delhi.

Sanamahism, and a range of physical practices like Manipuri martial arts, *thang-ta*, Manipuri classical dance, kathak, improvisation, and butoh in his work.

Through *One Voice*, Nongmeikapam invites the audience to view the dynamic between the oppressor and the oppressed as one that is linked. He believes that the victim and the torturer "merge together into one body"[25] and have a shared experience of their trauma. The embodied crossings between the oppressor and the oppressed as well as the regional and transnational culture is where lies the politics of Nongmeikapam's work, which I discuss below.

Witnessing *One Voice*

Nongmeikapam, the Chair, and the Lamp (Figure 4):

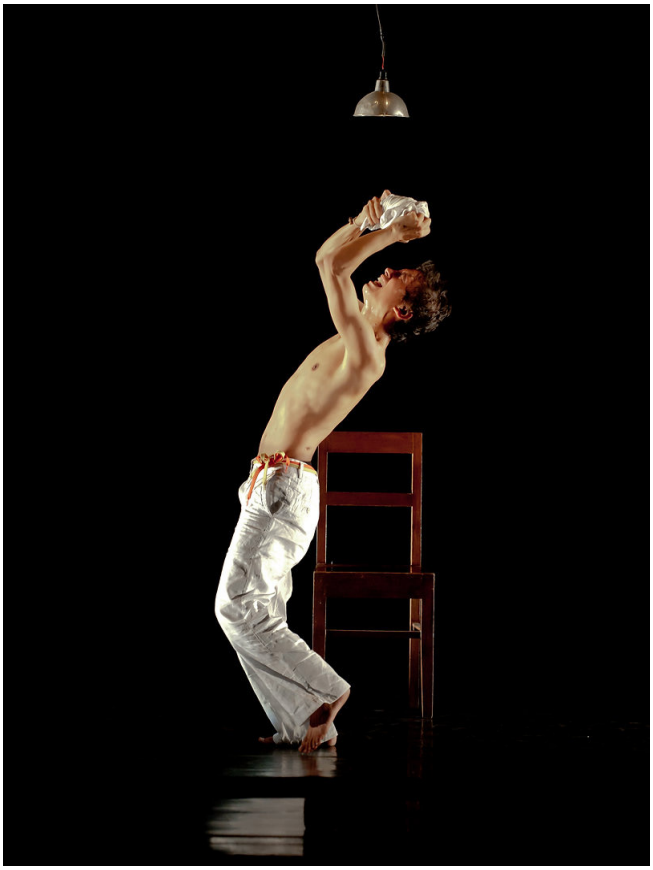

Figure 4: Surjit Nongmeikapam performing One Voice. Sri Ram Center, Mandi House, Delhi. Picture Credit: Soumita and Soumit.

He moves back to the chair, drags it to the center, the lamp drops down from the ceiling. He takes off his shirt stylistically, rotates it around and behind his body and clumps it into a tight ball in front of his face and then lifts it overhead. Eyes closed, he crunches the cloth with full force and exerts a loud cry, arching his back and then returning it to the center. He opens the creases in his shirt and places it on the back of the chair.

Nongmeikapam establishes a clear relationship with the chair as the piece progresses. Chair represents the place, position, and source of power, and at the same time, place of confinement. The piece begins with Nongmeikapam sitting on an empty wooden chair placed on the left downstage corner. He takes out a piece of paper, perhaps a passport-sized photograph, from the pocket of his pants. The audience does not see the photograph. The piece comes full circle, when in the end, he walks towards the center aisle in the auditorium and turns to sit facing the chair on the stage. Once again, he takes the photograph out of his trousers. He extends his hand, outwards and at an arm-length distance in front of his chest, his eyes staring at the chair on the stage. In doing so, he reverses the look of the victimized (performer) and returns it as the gaze of the oppressor (sitting in the audience).

Both these chairs where he takes turns and sits are placed in one line. The positioning of these chairs strengthens the connection between the oppressor and the oppressed. Power fluctuates when Nongmeikapam moves from one chair to the other. He embodies the identity of the one who watches and the

25 Nongmeikapam, Interviewed by the author on August 24, 2022, in Imphal, Manipur.

one who is being watched, being surveilled. Through this action, he ties privilege/power and oppression together.

Nongmeikapam's choreographic approach swings between his use and renunciation of stylistic movements from Manipuri and kathak dance styles. Inherent in this choreography is a somatics-based approach to play with the architecture of the dance form, its lines and the geometry, and its embodied physical and cultural resonances. For example, Nongmeikapam explores turning as a geometric principle deconstructed from the circular wrist and arm movements in both kathak and Manipuri dance styles. Leading with the elbows, his arm comes in and out of his center line, one hand always on top of the other. His wrist circles, the back of the palm faces forwards and turns to activate fingers. He picks something with his thumb and index finger, brings it close to his nose and smells, and releases the gesture a few times. Wrists dance in coordination with the opposite knee as it elevates up to the chest/belly. The other knee of the standing leg is deeply bent to ground his posture. He performs the wrist circles with the opposite knee lift one at a time and turns around himself while performing the hand gestures. This is where he performs a *chali*, a stylistic walk characteristic of Manipuri dance style, where his hips are low, one knee is bent and the other one lifts and touches the ground in front and side, as he travels in front and sideways. This gentle mobility, indicating moments of recovery, is contradicted with intense pressure on the body.

The association between socio-cultural influence on psychophysical states of the traumatized becomes stronger with this bodily movement. With his eyes closed, as his body shakes, Nongmeikapam unbuttons his shirt revealing the murmuring of the flesh underneath. Keeping his eyes shut, he points his index finger towards the audience and brings it back to place it on his lips. The one who silences and the one who is silenced are brought together in this moment. They are also entangled in this transaction. The shaking transitions into various modulations of his voice. As his entire body shakes from feet up, his voice begins to sound distressed until it reaches a point that his scream transitions into a folk rhythm associated with Manipuri classical dance (Nongmeikapam is singing *haiyaah-hey*). Through forced muting of sensations of touch, sight, smell, and kinesthesia, he shows how these capacities to hear, speak, and move are withdrawn or silenced in the experience of trauma, torture, and oppression. Here, his body is hyper mobile as every cell in his body is moving with intense rigor yet immobile as he is fixed to one location.

Trained in butoh, Nongmeikapam is inspired by its "philosophy of openness."[26] He stays attentive to impulses, sensations, sounds, and vibrations both within his body and space that lead him to make contradictory—impulsive and non-linear—movement choices. This constant disintegration of form is kinesthetically experienced and made hypervisible in Nongmeikapam's piece. Furthermore, Nongmeikapam's training in *thang-ta* lends him a grounded physicality as well as an agility to contort spine in non-neutral alignment and switch spatial location, inspired by the movement of *Lairen Mathek*,[27] the spine of the python. There are moments where the body is in pain and is collapsing, back is arching and spine is spiraling/twisting

26 Annette Leday and Surjit Nongmeikapam, 2021, "Dance India Today: In conversation with Surjit Nongmeikapam," Narthaki Official, March 21, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4MGFqy7JrPI&list=PLawHnK-B4UjotvTtPFU7mD42FEq2ac_nDo&index=5.

27 Central to Manipuri language, dance (*Jagoi*), and martial arts form (*Thang-ta*).

beyond comfort, to moments where the body is grounded (e.g., deep lunges), is balanced (e.g., one leg balances) and is light (e.g., Manipuri classical style dancing with light plies and curvilinear pathways of the arms).

Conclusion

These embodied contradictions in form, cultural influences, and psychophysical states represent the dancing body as the site for dissent as well as the site for contesting trauma and the site for healing. It is where mainland vs regional cultural politics are negotiated. Moreover, the use and deconstruction of different dance styles such as Manipuri martial arts, *thang-ta*, Manipuri classical dance, kathak, improvisation, and butoh, demonstrates an orientation towards a double-impulse of being local and global, being internally rooted and simultaneously reaching outwards in Nongmeikapam's work, which reflects a unique sense of cultural hybridity.

In being grounded in his religious philosophy and fluid in his treatment of different regional, transnational, and global movement practices and vocabularies, Nongmeikapam employs hybridity in two distinct ways—as an assimilatory and anti-assimilatory strategy. In theorizing hybridity, May Joseph (1999) has argued that "the modern move to deploy hybridity as a disruptive democratic discourse of cultural citizenship is a distinctly anti-imperial and antiauthoritarian development" (1). In using hybridity as an "assimilatory strategy," (21) as Anusha Kedhar (2020) theorizes in her work, Nongmeikapam not only sets up a transaction between regional, national, and global cultures, but also in doing that, he transforms hybridity into an anti-authoritarian and anti-assimilatory strategy to resist being enveloped into mainstream Indian (Hindu) culture. In this way, Nongmeikapam's synthesis of different dance styles to generate his choreosomatic language that is rooted in local Manipuri sensibilities could usefully be called *resistive hybridity*.

Nongmeikapam's *resistive hybridity* is both a strategy and a tactic to utilize the processes of assimilation and to disrupt them. Nongmeikapam assimilates cross-cultural movement techniques while constructing an aesthetic that is legible as *local* and contemporary in both form and content. For example, in *One Voice*, Nongmeikapam performs curvilinear pathways of the wrist and arms as representative of kathak and Manipuri dance, moves into deep lunges and one leg balances representative of his martial arts training in *thang-ta* while staying attentive to impulses, sensations, sounds, and vibrations, as influenced by his training in butoh, that lead him to make impulsive and non-linear movement choices. As he embodies the kinesthetic principles from these different physical practices, he foregrounds the core philosophy of his work—embodying the spine of the python as a symbol of Manipuri nationalism and resisting the forced Hinduization and Indianization of the region.

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