 Manipuri legend has it that when Lai Guru Sidaba created the earth, he created seven Laibangthous (Gods) and seven Lainuras (Goddesses) and these celestial beings leveled the uneven surface of the earth with their dance.

In Manipur, dance is seen not only as an art form but a medium of worship and enjoyment, a door to the divine, and a medium of expression that is closely interspersed with its social fabric. Manipuri Dance is purely religious and its aim is to create an essentially spiritual experience, both for the dancer and the audience.

The study of Manipuri dance has been imparted over the ages in the 'Guru-Shishya Parampara' through a holistic approach. Here, students are imparted knowledge not only on dance but also on the values of life.

The traditional repertoire of Manipuri dance varies, from the pre-Hindu ritualistic dances of the priestesses that describe the creation of earth, heaven and man, the ancient martial art form of Thang-Ta, to the Rasleela (the cosmic dance of Lord Krishna).
Lai Haraoba

Lai Haraoba denotes the Festival of Gods. The traditional Lai Haraoba Dance, which enacts the creation of the Universe, was initially a part of the Lai Haraoba festival, though over time it has taken on an entity unto itself. The dance is traditionally presented at the village temples before the shrines of Umanglai, the ancestral God of the Meiteis. The principal performers are the maibas (priests) and maibis (priestesses), considered to be the embodiments of purity. They invoke the deity through their repetitive and rhythmic movements, which are highly symbolic. It is essentially a ritualistic dance and is considered to be the precursor of the classical Manipuri dance form seen today. The maibas and maibis, through their dance, trace the philosophy of the Meitei people and describe their way of life.

The Lai Haraoba festival, which mirrors the pre-Vaishnavite culture of Manipur begins towards the end of the year and continues into the New Year (April-May). It is celebrated at the shrines of the ancestral forefathers known as 'laibungs' scattered all over the land. At this festival, people seek atonement for their sins and also resolve to lead a chaste life in the coming year.

This dance is unique in that it provides a glimpse into the life and culture of the Manipuri people. Members of the royal family mingle and dance with the people, all under the direction of the high priests. Customarily, the King dances with his Queen, while young princes and princesses choose partners of their liking from the crowds.
Kanglei Haraoba

It is said that when Khoriphaba, the son of Laviningthou Soraren, the Lord of Heaven, reached the earth in search of his mother, Konthoujam Thampa, he was enchanted by the beauty of the earth. He then saw Thanjing, Marjing, Wangbren and Konbru (the ancestral Gods who guarded the four corners of the earth) performing a dance and requested them to allow him to join in.

The Gods initially refused him as he had no partner. However, they later allowed him to choose a partner from amongst the Gods' divine daughters present in the audience. Blindfolded, he chose his partner with a Kangjei Kaghu (stick) and then joined the dance. Though there have been a few modifications, the tradition of Lai Nupi Thiba, which translates to “God’s search for a consort”, continues till date and is performed by priestesses.

Maibi Laching Jagoi

Maibi Laching Jagoi is the first item of the Kanglei Haraoba Festival. Despite the prevalence of the Vaishnavite faith, every part of Manipur has a guardian deity, who still commands the devotion of the state’s denizens. The rains herald month-long festivities, with prayers offered to and celebrations held in favour of all the different deities.

The Maibi Laching Jagoi is a dance performed by two maibus, in which they enact the creation of the world. Through this dance, the maibus invoke the deity to initiate the celebrations and exhort them to bless the entire community. Depicting the creation and evolution of life, the dance is an ultimate offering to the guardian deities.

Thougal Jagoi Laisam Jagoi

In this dance, men and women worshippers present themselves before the deity, for an auspicious beginning to the ritualistic duties of the day. Towards the end of this dance a tug-of-war between men and women is enacted. The dance has been stylized for stage presentations.

Pao-Sa Jagoi

This dance is part of the traditional Kanglei Haraoba. The word 'pao-sa' means conversation.

Nongpok Panthoibi set out in search of Nongpok Ningthou. In the course of her journey, she reached Nongmai-Ching, a hillock where she met Nongpok Ningthou. As soon as she greeted him, they recalled incidents of their past life and celebrated by singing and dancing.
Mao Naga Dance

The Mao Naga Dance is a popular dance of the Mao Naga community, who reside in the northern mountains of Manipur. Young girls and boys perform the dance during the annual harvesting and seed-sowing festivals (Chikhuni). It involves intricate footwork along with graceful body movements. Mao Maram Dance (Asharali Odo), a colourful dance known for its vocal rhythms and mellifluous movements, is another popular dance of this community.

Kabui Dance

The Kabuis, who inhabit the western hill ranges of Manipur, have a rich tradition of dance and music and are well known for their exquisite costumes. During the Gang-Ngai festival, the Kabuis perform a series of dances in different stylized forms, accompanied by the sound of heavy drums and high-pitched songs. The boys wield sharp weapons (daos) in their hands and move around in circles along with girls dressed in traditional costumes.

The Shim Lam Dance is also known as the Fly Dance. According to Kabui legend, a prophet named Mhung was the creator of laws relating to all living creatures on the earth. Mhung performed a sacrifice called 'Jourumei', to which all the creatures were invited. Each of the species performed their own dance. The Shim Lam dance is believed to be based on the dance that was performed by Tajulbon, a flying insect with shiny wings, which moves around from one flower to another drinking nectar. The dance is performed during the Gang-Ngai Festival of the Kabuis.
The Kit Lam is performed by the Kabuis to celebrate their harvest. This annual festival mainly involves merrymaking. The rhythmic dance imitates the movement of the crickets.

The Katabenlu Laam, which means Bangle Dance, is known for its intricate footwork and rhythmic movements.

The Takin Taremlaam, is also performed at the Gang-Ngai Festival of the Kabuis in January. The Kabuis, through their dances, pay homage to their ancestors and worship the spirits of home and hearth.

Luivat Pheizak Dance

The Luivat Pheizak Dance is one of the most popular dances of the Thangkhul Naga community of Manipur. This dance, which depicts the different stages of cultivation and the simple lifestyle of the Tangkhul Naga community, is performed during all traditional festivals. There is no musical accompaniment other than the quadruple tones or notes of different pitches. The dance features colourful costumes, variation of notes from act to act and the agile movement of hand and legs.
Thang-Ta

The art of Thang-Ta represents an ancient and remarkable tradition of Manipur. It exhibits an extraordinary technique of combat using the Thang (sword) and the Ta (spear). Thang-Ta symbolises the traditional martial art techniques of the Manipuri.

It was customary for all Manipuri men to undergo rigorous training to master this art in order to prepare them to respond to a war-like situation. This dance helps provide basic training in warfare and develops personal strength, speed, sensitivity and agility of mind. In appreciation of the various benefits afforded by the dance, the Kings of Manipur used to maintain Thang-Ta experts in their courts. Training for this dance begins early and is an arduous task. All dance movements of the Meitis are said to have originated from this martial art and are linked to the snake lore of Manipur. The movements of the Thang help to ward off evil spirits, while the Ta is held in position to protect. The martial Meitis practice three types of Manipuri martial arts — sword fighting, spear-fighting and wrestling. These various forms of self-defense have been transformed into graceful performing arts. A Thang-Ta performance begins with Khurumjaba, an invocatory item, in which the performers seek blessings from the Lord, the gurus as well as the audience by holding their instruments or with bare hands.
**Thang-Chungoi Yannaba**

This is a duel fight, where both the warriors carry a sword and a shield. The swordsmen use the Chungoi (shield) to protect themselves against possible attacks. The sword and the shield are wielded with agility and precision to thwart all attempts of attack.

**Ta-Kousaba**

This dance mainly involves the use of the spear and is performed in an open area. There are nine kinds of Khausaral (steps with a spear), evolved by experts over the ages, and handed down through generations. In this performance, the artistes select one of the Khausarals and present it in the form of a dance. The warrior dancers hold a spear in one hand and a chung (a long shield) in the other. This dance forms part of the Kwak Jatia and Lai-Haraoba festivals.

**Thang-Ta-Chaieraba**

This dance comprises a duel between the sword and the spear. While one dancer carries a sword and a shield, the other wields a spear but no shield. The man carrying the spear performs steps called Khausaba under the overarching principle of Khausaral. The steps used by the swordsman are known as Thanghairol. In this dance, both men try to defend each other’s attack.
Yet-Thang Oi-Thang Yannaba

This fight involves great skill and proficiency as each dancer handles two swords simultaneously. This martial art form is used in battles but has been stylised for stage presentations. It is mainly performed during royal functions and at the Lai Haraoba Festival.

Thang Leiteng Haiba

Also known as decorated sword play, this dance is only performed by highly skilled swordsmen. The choreography combines martial steps with complete mastery of the weapon.

Thang Amaga Aniga Yanaba

In this fight, a man equipped with two swords fights two opponents at a time, one handling a sword and the other, a spear. The principles and rules of Thanghailol are followed in this dance too.

Chel Khatpa

This dance forms part of the Thang-Ta repertoire and is performed using one long stick and two shorter ones. It is a form of Cheitek Kotpi, an indigenous Manipuri game.
Meibul-Thang-Ta

Successive gurus of this martial tradition have enriched this variant of the Thang-Ta. This dance uses the Thang-Leiteng (sword movement) and Ta-Khousaba (spear movement) but the weapons are replaced by firesticks. This interesting art of the fire dance known as Meibul Haiba is a visual treat.
Pung Cholom

The Pung, or Manipuri drum is the soul of Manipuri dance. The Pung Cholom dance is performed during the festival of Holi. A visual interpretation of the various rhythmic patterns played on the Pung, this dance portrays a drummer identifying completely with the intricate rhythms he plays on the drum and expressing it through corresponding body movements and footwork. The Pung Cholom is part of the music of the Sankirtan tradition and is acclaimed as one of the best art forms of the state.
Lhou Sha

The Lhou Sha is a war dance performed at every confrontation between two villages. The dance form has been preserved as part of the tradition of the Maring community of Manipur and marks the conclusion of significant festivals. The dance, which was initially performed by men only, has evolved into a folk art, including the tribe's womenfolk in its ambit.

Dhol Cholom

The Dhol is a large drum used during Manipuri dances, especially on religious occasions. The Dhol Cholom is a form of singing and dancing to the accompaniment of the Dhol and is part of the Manipuri Sankirtan tradition. The dance is performed by male dancers in a group. The drumming rises gradually from a whisper to a thunderous climax as the tempo of the dance builds up in equal measure. This dance of the Meitis is associated with the Yaoshang Spring Festival.
**Dhol Dholak Cholom**

Holi, the festival of colours, is known as Yaoshang in Manipur and is accompanied by devotional songs and dances. After the advent of Hinduism, Vaishnavism became a way of life for the Manipuris. Consequently, Sankirtan, or the worship of Lord Krishna and Radha through the medium of music and dance, became the most powerful expression of Bhaktirasa. This Vaishnavite tradition of devotional songs and dances is performed as an offering to Lord Krishna. Sankirtan, now an integral part of Manipuri culture, is performed on all important occasions and festivals. During the festival of Yaoshang, Dhol Dholak Cholom is performed using the Dhol, the Dholak and a variety of drums. Dressed in colourful costumes, the drummers play a spectrum of rhythms and perform acrobatic feats simultaneously. The dance beautifully combines vigour and grace.

**Mandil Nartan**

This is a festival dance performed during the Jhulan Yatra in Manipur. The dancers use Mandila (small cymbals) to provide the musical accompaniment to their performance. The Mandil Nartan depicts Radha and Krishna on a Jhula (swing) surrounded by the Sakhis who dance around them.

**Khubak Ishei**

This is a festival dance performed during Rathayatra. The song of Dashavatara is performed while the artistes clap their hands as accompaniment to the dance. Khubak Ishei brings out the Tandava aspect of Manipuri dance.