

Soundscapes Of War



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1. A story on the Khongjom Parva/Parba art form of Manipur

*Manipur sana leimayol,
Chingna koina pansaba
Chingmee na koina pangakpa
Chingburoi tamburoi
Tushangshitna khundaba
Nungshijaba lamdamni...*

If someone from Manipur is reading these lyrics, the person will be reading them with a familiar tune playing in their head. These are the lyrics of Manipur *shingtharol*, an important part of the *Khongjom parva*, which describes the beauty of Manipur. *Khongjom parva* is a ballad form of Manipur which started with the narration of the Anglo-Manipuri War of 1891, locally known as ‘Khongjom Laan’ or ‘Khongjom War’.

The story goes that Samjetsabam Leinou, popularly known as Dhobi Leinou, witnessed the war and he was devastated by the tragedy that Manipur went through. He started narrating eye-witness accounts about the war in the form of songs and he sang these to a beat by tapping on his knees or on a tin can.



Gate to Khongjom War Memorial. Photo: Nicky Chandam

His new style of singing was deeply influenced by the existing oral narratives of the Manipuri fiddle *pena*, *khullang eshei*, *khunung eshei*, and *nat sankirtan*. Later, he polished his form and used a *dholak* (drum) instead of a tin can and a new form of ballad emerged. The art form gradually gained popularity and found practitioners among the Manipuri men. Some of Dhobi Leinou's famous disciples were Khumanthem Chaoba, Leimapokpam Herachandra, and Takhellambam Thambalngou. With growing popularity, *Khongjom parva* extended beyond the stories of the Khongjom War and included royal chronicles and even stories from the *Mahabharat* and *Ramayana*, or a compilation of war-themed stories.

The Anglo-Manipuri War of 1891 played a significant role in Manipur's history. This war represented a major turning point as after its defeat, Manipur lost its status as an independent princely kingdom. This evoked grief so deep that these songs resonate even today after being passed down multiple generations. *Khongjom parva* was able to forge an emotional connection with the audience and was a hit among the people.

Local lore has it that one morning, when Maharaja Sir Churachand (1886–1941) was playing cricket at the Eastern Ground outside the royal palace, he heard a man riding a bullock cart, singing *khullang eshei* (a type of folk song). He summoned the man and told him that he found his singing moving. The Maharaja ordered him to pursue the art of *Khongjom parva*, which also sings about royal chronicles. That man was Khumanthem Choaba, who later became Dhobi

Leinou's disciple. Khumanthem Chaoba was already trained in *nat sankirtan*, *manohar sai*, and *pena* along with other vocal performances and was a well-versed *dholak* player. Thus, he took on *Khongjom parva* without much challenge.

When the wounds of wars were fresh, people found it patriotic to listen to *Khongjom parva* even at ceremonies like the birth of a child or a wedding. However, the disconnect between the emotions at such joyous occasions became larger as time went by. Chaoba was asked by the royal court if he could sing stories other than those of pathos. Chaoba accepted the request. He reworked the *Ramayana* in *Khongjom parva* style and performed for seven days at the *Mahabali Mandop* near the royal palace. This was the first time that stories other than that of the Khongjom War were sung in *Khongjom parva* style, and thus, began the expansion of this art form. Chaoba had many disciples who later specialised in different chapters of *Khongjom parva*.

Around the 1930s, one day at the royal palace of Manipur, Her Highness, Queen Sangai called her friends of *sana pala* (a women group of singers) for lunch at the royal palace. While waiting for the meal, a young teenage singer Ibemni asked her friends if they wanted to listen to something like *Khongjom parva*. Her friends were excited, they didn't know Ibemni could sing *Khongjom parva*. Well, she couldn't ... technically. She asked for a *dholak*. With the *dholak*, Ibemni sang the lyrics of the song of *thabal chongba* (a community dance form) in the form of *Khongjom parva* and amazed her friends with her talent.

Her friend Sangai, the wife of Maharaja Bodhchandra (eldest son of Maharaja Sir Churachand), was so excited that she ran and informed Maharaja Bodhchandra that her friend knew how to sing the *Khongjom parva*. Maharaja Bodhchandra called Ibemni and asked her to sing. Performing in front of the royal highness scared young Ibemni and with her mother, she ran away from the palace. But she could not escape a royal order and with tears in her eyes and a lot of fear she was brought in front of the king. Maharaja Bodhchandra assured her that everything was fine. No one was going to punish her or say anything. He mentioned that Ibemni's father, Khumanthem Chaoba, paid regular service to Maharaja Bodhchandra's father and he was sure that Khumanthem Chaoba Singh's daughter would have inherited the musical genes of the talented and revered musician. Ibemni humbly submitted to the king that she did not know how to sing *Khongjom parva* but she made it sound like the original. She presented her song before the Maharaja who was pleased with her performance and awarded her seven rupees and fifty paise. This was a huge sum then (before World War II). The Maharaja commanded her to formally learn the art form.

This is how Ibemni's journey in *Khongjom parva* started.

Nameirakpam Ibemni Devi, then known by her maiden name, Khumanthem Ibemni Devi, had trained as a *bashok*, *sana pala*, *nat sankirtan*, *manohar sai*, and *Moirang sai* singer. After the king's order, she started learning *Khongjom parva* from her father's disciples – Moirang Tona and Khurai Tombi.

Soon she started performing *Khongjom parva* in public during festivals and also at private functions like the birth of a child or a wedding.

But Ibemni's path was not a bed of roses as despite the king's support and encouragement with which she started her journey, some male royal courtiers were not pleased with her playing the *dholak* as she was the first woman to do so. They stopped Ibemni from entering the royal palace to perform. Their bone of contention was that she was left-handed. In some parts of India, it is considered uncivilised and disrespectful to use one's left hand for practising an art form as that is the hand normally used for ablutions. In a controversial move, Ibemni started singing her songs to the accompaniment of her left hand beating the *dholak*. Hearing the commotion, Sangai Maharani came to her friend's rescue. She questioned the courtiers, 'You claim that the right hand represents a male. She is a female. So, what harm has she done by using her left hand?' The men could not refute the queen's logic.

After the Japanese invasion (WWII), Ibemni was performing at a private function where an officer of the royal palace handed her a couple of hundred rupees while she was performing. Ibemni did not even bother to look at him, she was focused on singing the tragic story of the *Khongjom* War. Annoyed, the officer stomped his feet. One elder in the audience got up and told the officer that Ibemni was not a common dancer, and it was not her custom to accept money like this. Out of devotion if he wanted to give her anything, he should put it on the plate of offering kept at the corner like everybody else. The officer put the money on the plate and saluted Ibemni.

On another day, when Ibemni was performing, a well-known *goonda* kept throwing coins at her. He was interrupting her, but no one confronted the man fearing his influence. As he continued his annoying behaviour, an elder asked him to stop. Instead of quietening down, the *goonda* tried to stick silver coins on Ibemni's face. She folded her hands and respectfully said, "Please, do not do this." He went back to his seat but soon came back. He caught Ibemni's still folded hands and stuck silver coins on her face. This time, Ibemni lost it. She got hold of his collar and with her other hand, slapped his face. She went on to beat

and pummel him to ground. The famous *goonda* had to run away with his clothes in tatters.

It is to be noted that in the past, women practising an art form in public spaces were not respected by many. But *Khongjom parva* changed this attitude to some extent. *Khongjom parva* brought forth stories of the valour, bravery, glory, and tragedy of Manipuri sons. These were stories of the tragedies which helped society on its path to healing and reconciliation. Thus, women performing *Khongjom parva* gained the respect of the public.

Ibemni paved the way for women in Manipur to practise the oral art form of *Khongjom parva*. She started teaching Manipuri girls from Manipur, Tripura, and Assam. She also taught boys. However, none of the boys took up the art form as a full-time career.

Ibemni's students were mostly from families who had invited her to perform, or seen and loved her performance so much that they brought their sons/daughters to her for tutelage. Ibemni treated all her students as her family. Her students from Manipur called her *ema* (mother). Those who came from far off areas like Cachar (Assam) called her *oja* (teacher). These students were taught not just *Khongjom parva* but other art forms like *nat sankirtan*, *manohar sai*, and *holi jhulon*.

As a kingdom, Manipur saw many wars and it was women who had to bear the brunt of these wars. Battles with neighbouring countries were once as regular as the rains in the region. When men left to fight wars, women had to manage their homes and prop the economy. Their pathos came out when they sang *Khongjom parva*. They lamented the tragedies that they faced with these endless wars. *Khongjom parva* became an art form which evoked patriotism and also had a significant role in the healing process for all the burns of wars and battles. "*Khongjom parva* is not only a ballad. The aesthetics behind *Khongjom parva* is bringing out the lives and valour of warriors," says Nameirakpam Tiken Singh, Director of the Progressive Artiste Laboratory (PAL), Imphal, an ethnomusicologist and N. Ibemni Devi's son.

Everyone in Manipur knew the story of the Anglo-Manipuri war and other stories, so what drew people to the art form? It was improvisations by the artistes, character building of the warriors, the descriptions which brought alive the stories, and their poetry and rhythm.

There is a popular description of *Khongjom parva* which says that Paona Brajabrashi (a major of the Manipuri army) 'cut off the thread of bombs in the

air,' which were hurled at the Manipuri army by the British army in the battle of *khongjom*. Much later the Manipuri intelligentsia started questioning this incident and the types of bombs which were available around 1891. It was spoken of as a myth woven by 'non-scientific storytellers.' One day a curious N. Tiken Singh asked his mother whether the claims made by the intelligentsia were true. Ibemni chided him. She told him that having colonised many countries in the world the British at that time were a highly egoistic group of people. The expression cutting off the thread of bombs was a metaphor that Paona Brajabashi, an army major of a tiny kingdom, used to hurt the Britishers' ego by giving them a tough time in the battle. She told her son not to share this story with anyone (N. Tiken Singh chuckled as he shared this story with the author).

Ibemni shared the format of *Khongjom parva* in one of her interviews on All India Radio, Imphal. *Khongjom parva* is classified into two types, *ningthourol sheishak* and *Moirang kangleirol sheishak*. *Khongjom parva* begins with the *dholak*, followed by *gourabot* (hymns of Vaishnav gods and gurus), and then by the *Manipuri shingtharol*. It is to be noted that Vaishnavism was accepted by the royal palace of Manipur only in the 18th century. So, it should be remembered that *gourachandra* or *gourabot* is not sung for those kings who did not embrace Vaishnavism. *Manipur shingtharol* is followed by the main story. A *bhajan* concludes the performance. To be a good *Khongjom parva* artiste, one also needs to be a good *dholak* player. *Khongjom parva* was usually sung for 3 to 4 hours or longer during the early days. However, with changing times we see performances as short as 30 minutes to one hour these days.

This following song sequence is an excerpt from the performance of one of Ibemni's students, Laishram Mani Devi. The sequence is an example of the flow of *Khongjom Parva*. Video courtesy: Doordarshan Manipur Youtube Channel. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7KOtdYRqLyg>]

Tekhaoda Shamu Phaba (Ningthourol)

Poirei Meitei ningthourel

Liklai Karta ningthouna

Numit singbun kayani

Loibi chengnungda lengngakpana

Nongmagi numit amagi

Enung manadang challakpada

Lamlenna Tekhaogi khongnangkhongda

*Karta ningthou thungnare.
Taribara Maharani Ibemma
Ngashigi numit asida
Sargadeva gi konungda changbado
Matam ama chadare
Hayenggi nong nganlaga changlashi
Ooriba Tekhaogi khullak asida
Ngashi ahingda panjage
Hangngukhige haidana
Lamlenna Tekhaogi khullak tamladana
Sanagi khong lengsillakle.
Tekhao nupi lukhrabido
Brindarani makhongda
Brinda seva touduna leiringei,
Palem manbi Ima O
Ima gi mongba naranyai nanai yak
Ngashi ahingdadi panjarage,
Ima na kari haibage.
Ima gi Ibungo nungshiba
Ima gi yum ashidi
Lukhrabigi yumnine
Panbadi yaroi khummakle.
Ima na panba yaroi haibirabashu
Tara charaktabana korou mashing yammedako
Ima gi ingkhol da houriba
Taojing na kwa ase amatadi chajakhige hairure.
Ima gi taojing kwa ase taojing haijing phadari
Chabadi yaroi khummakle.
Phare adu oirabadi Ima gi taojing kwa ase
Phana phade heijing phade hairabadi hayeng tung phaobada
Taojing heijing pharaganu
Taojing heijing phadaba shenglabadi Ima O
Hayeng gi nong nganbakanda taojing heijing pharoko.
Saapka borga loinaradana pibirammi Lainingthou.*

These lyrics are an excerpt from the complete chapter of the *Khongjom Parva*, 'Tekhaoda Shamu Phaba,' which describes Maharaja Bhagyachandra catching a wild elephant in the kingdom of Tekhao (Assam). This is an important chapter in the warrior character of the Maharaja. Around 1765, the Awa (Burmese) invaded Manipur. The Manipuri army could not withstand the strong fight put up by the Awa army. Maharaja Bhagyachandra fled to the kingdom of Tekhao and planned to build his army to win back Manipur. During this time Maharaja Bhagyachandra tamed a wild elephant, proving that he was a warrior. This led to the Manipuri Maharaja being accepted by the Tekhao king. This story has been immortalised by *Khongjom parva* artistes. In the lyrics given above, the balladeer describes how the Maharaja sought shelter with a widow on his journey but she refused to give him shelter. He then requested the widow to allow him to have a *kwa* (betel nut and leaf) from her garden. She declined the request saying that they were not ripe yet. The Maharaja left her with a curse and boon that if she was lying, then may her *kwa* never ripen and if she was telling the truth, may it ripen the next day.

Interestingly, Ibemni only sang with *bhakti ras* (devotion). This may be a reason why people found a healing vibe in her ballad. All her compositions were completely oral and not a piece was written down and referred to while singing. This is incredible as she has more than 100 compositions to her credit. The royal chronicles she sang were approved by the royal board. Even back then the grammar Nazis were active – some of them complained about Ibemni pronouncing 'commissioner' as 'comison' in her renditions. She sought the help of Sanasam Gourahari, private secretary to Maharaja Bodhchandra. Gourahari told her to continue saying 'comison' because the great warrior and revered legend General Thangal also pronounced 'commissioner' as 'comison.' Such rawness, at times, added to the authenticity of the stories.

All India Radio, Imphal was aired from Assam before 1963. Recordings from Manipur were taken to Guwahati and then aired. N. Ibemni Devi was the first *Khongjom parva* singer for All India Radio, Imphal. When Jawaharlal Nehru died in 1964, Chandam Gopal Singh and B. Jayantakumar Sharma from All India Radio, Imphal commissioned Ibemni to compose a 15-minute long *Khongjom parva* on his life. The write-up was provided by Chandam Gopal Singh and B. Jayantakumar to Ibemni and she improvised the story in *Khongjom parva* style. Later she was given similar projects on the lives of Mahatma Gandhi, Indira Gandhi, and Lal Bahadur Shastri.

Ibemni is credited as the first woman dholak player in Manipur. She was also instrumental for initiating the participation of women in *holi pala*. It is rare for percussionists to sing while playing the percussion. Ibemni singing while playing the *dholak* is even more rare as she is a woman.

Three years after Ibemni formally stepped into the art form of *Khongjom parva*, she was awarded a *jai patra* by the royal palace of Manipur. Later, she was honoured with many awards: Meidingu Bheighyachandra Award 2008, *Kamalasana Rajkumari Ningshing Mana* by Manipur Sahitya Parishad, the fourth-highest civilian award in the Republic of India the Padma Shri in 2012, and the Cultural Forum Lifetime Achievement Award 2014 by Cultural Forum Manipur. Nameirakpam Ibemni Devi passed away on January 25, 2020, at the age of 95.

Ibemni's legacy is carried on by women *Khongjom parva* practitioners of Manipur, especially by prominent artistes and her students like L. Mani Devi and K. Sundari.



[Photos provided by N. Tiken Singh]

Sources

Interview with N. Ibemni Devi by All India Radio, Imphal

Nameirakpam Tiken Singh, Director Progressive Artistes Laboratory and N. Ibemni Devi's son

Bijaya Yumlembam, Programme Head, All India Radio, Imphal

Tomba Singh, visiting faculty, Manipur University of Culture

Interview with L. Mani Devi by Doordarshan Kendra, Imphal

2. SONG OF SARENGLA

As narrated to Meena Longjam by
Arambam Angamba Singh,
Co-Founder,
2nd World War Imphal Campaign Foundation

It was March 1944 and the war had reached Manipur. At that time, the Imphal valley was deserted but one could also witness the flurry of military activity, gearing up for a pre-emptive strike on Burma. However, the Japanese advance was imminent and it was only a matter of days before they knocked on the door.

Spring was at its best in the blue misty mountains guarding the eastern wall of this once ancient Asiatic nation. It was a splendid sight which could not be easily missed. The eastern corridor was home to the erstwhile head-hunting Tangkhul tribes. Villages perched on the top of rolling impassable mountains dotted the terrain in this area. On the fateful day of March 16, 1944, the villages were awakened in the stillness of the late afternoon. Snaking columns of Japanese soldiers in single file approached quickly from across the Arakan ranges. About 45,000 of them moved steadily westward from the Chindwin river. They were part of the Japanese 31st Division led by Lt. Gen Kotuko Sato moving to the British transit town of Kohima on the strategic Imphal-Dimapur road. Ukhrul, with a population of about 50,000, was then the British administrative headquarters of the erstwhile Ukhrul sub-division. The Japanese column took control of the town in no time.

Education was a luxury back in the 1940s. There was just one graduate and two matriculates in the whole sub-division. Interestingly they were also the only teachers teaching in the one middle school in town. Meanwhile, after arriving at Ukhrul the Japanese were hard-pressed as they needed interpreters for Hindi or English while interacting with the locals. Please be reminded that there was also an Azad Hind Fauj (Indian National Army) contingent fighting alongside the Japanese against the British. So there was this frantic search for locals with some command of the language. Somehow the story of Miss Sarengla reached the Japanese commander's ears.

The following is a song about Sarengla in Tangkhul dialect:

Title: *Wonda Khalei Awonwui Ara Zimkhuilaga Paithuihaowa*

1. *Oh Ramphei Sarengla*
Oh Ramphei Sarengla
Eh Japan Preiva
Eh Japan Preiva Nagahar
Oh Nagahar Aming Kihoto?
Ah I Gahar Aming Masata Hoya
2. *Oh Masata Hoya Nashungthei*
Oh Nashungthei Railungli Zanga
Oh Railungli Zanga Japan Shi
Oh Japan Shi Kongkanda Thiya
Oh Kongkanda Thiya Sarengla
Oh Sarengla Chara Horama

Title: Fly away after sucking the nectar of the scented flower

1. Oh Ramphei Sarengla (2 times)
Oh Sarengla wife of Japanese
Eh wife of Japanese
Eh, wife of Japanese - you are
Eh! what name is your husband?
2. Oh is it Masata?
What a beautiful blossom
That entered the battlefield
How the Japanese were fascinated!
Oh what a pity for the Japanese
Met the site before the river
Ah shed tears Sarengla

Sarengla was a trained nurse from Nambisha village which lies on the track to Humine, another village that borders Burma. She was one of the very few fortunate ones in the area to have been touched by the light of education. She finished her initial schooling from Dr Grover's American Baptist Mission School at Kangpokpi. She walked for three days to reach Imphal and then Kangpokpi to reach her school. She completed her nursing school and apprenticeship at Dr John Berry White's Medical School in Dibrugarh, Assam. Dr John was a British

surgeon with the East India Company who started this medical college after retirement with his life savings of Rs 50,000.

Hurriedly a Japanese officer and two soldiers arrived in the village to look for Sarengla. Finding her house was not tough. Repeated requests from the hapless parents to leave her alone had no impact on the officers and finally, Sarengla had to bid farewell to her parents, uncertain about her dark future. She was a young maiden of marriageable age. Quickly they headed off for the Japanese camp. There she was engaged under a Japanese medical officer, Honsa Masata. Honsa was a strict and hot-headed disciplinarian. He had already been shunned by the villagers for his involvement in the murder of a Tangkhul school teacher from Hundung. The poor teacher had failed to comply with Honsa's order to arrange porters for which he was beheaded.

Sarengla reported at the Yasein Byoein or the Japanese field hospital where she attended to wounded soldiers wholeheartedly. Captain Honsa was enamoured by this young and intelligent Tangkhul maiden. He eventually took her as his companion. Meanwhile, it was already April and Sato's battle at Kohima was raging on. Streams of casualties arrived from the front in Kharasom village. Hurriedly, Honsa left with Sarengla for the village as their services were most needed in the casualty clearing station. They remained and worked tirelessly in the camp till around June end when the remaining 31st Division went on a controversial retreat to Chindwin river in Burma. Then they relocated.

On reaching Nambisha, Sarengla was handed back to her parents by medical officer Honsa Masata himself. According to legend, Honsa left with his pet dog. Before bidding farewell he requested Sarengla to stop worrying about him and to remember that he would have failed to make it if ever the dog returned. As the story goes the dog returned.

Sarengla was later contacted by Major R. Khating MC, the only Tangkhul and the king's commissioned officer near Ngaprum. She was later appointed at a British military hospital.

Later Khating apprehended a Kuki chief as he had provided information about Sarengla to the advancing Japanese army.

Sarengla survived the war.

