

MANIPURI CINEMA: INTERROGATING A FILM INDUSTRY

**Dissertation submitted to Jawaharlal Nehru University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for award of the degree**

MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY

JONI RAGUANGZIENLIU LEIVON



**CINEMA STUDIES
SCHOOL OF ARTS AND AESTHETICS
JAWAHARLAL NEHRU UNIVERSITY
NEW DELHI-110067
INDIA**

2012



School of Arts & Aesthetics
JAWAHARLAL NEHRU UNIVERSITY
New Delhi- 110 067, India

Telephone : 26742976, 26704177
Telefax : 91-11-26742976
E-mail : aesthete@mail.jnu.ac.in

DECLARATION

I declare that the dissertation entitled “**Manipuri Cinema: Interrogating a Film Industry**” submitted by me in partial fulfillment for the award of the degree of **Master of Philosophy** of Jawaharlal Nehru University is my own work. The dissertation has not been submitted for any degree of this university or any other university.

Joni Raguangzienliu Leivon

CERTIFICATE

We recommend that this dissertation be placed before the examiners for evaluation.

Dr. Parul Dave Mukherji
Dean

Ira Bhaskar
Supervisor

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are several people I want to thank and extend my gratefulness to, to those who have encouraged and supported me in many ways all throughout my writing to see the completion of this dissertation.

Foremost, I am deeply grateful to my supervisor Dr. Ira Bhaskar, who has been very patient and considerate towards me while I was faced with various challenges and problems during the writing of this paper and had even reached a point of almost giving up on this project. Her willingness to help and motivate me from the very beginning had encouraged me to push myself further in seeing this writing through. I am very grateful to her for opening her home for me and sharing various books, articles and DVDs with me and for the various discussions and suggestions shared through emails and phones to the very last hour of completing this paper. Dear Ira, I profusely thank you for motivating me and helping me with this dissertation and also apologise for all the times I was careless in my writing and my conduct.

I would also like to thank Dr. Ranjani Mazumdar, from whose classes and discussions I have learnt so much. I am grateful for all the help and suggestion she extended towards me while the proposal for this paper was made and even while I was struggling with certain arguments for this paper. I thank her for the enthusiasm and concern she showed towards me during the entire course of this programme.

I also thank Prof. Christine Gledhill for the various discussions and sharing in class and outside class which has helped me to better understand the subject and helped me during the submission of my term papers in the early part of the course.

I extend my gratefulness also to the non-teaching staff of the centre. Mr. Jagdish Vidhyarti for helping me in various ways whenever I needed help, to Diwan Ram, Satish, Harsh, Vinayak, Savita, Gulam Rasool and Meenakshi Sharma as well.

I also thank the TSWT-SPEAR project for their grant which has contributed in ways towards the completion of this paper. I thank Mrs Joshi and Lakshmi from the NFAI, Pune for extending their help to me by procuring various articles and journals that are otherwise hard to come by needed for my paper.

There are those I would like to thank who have helped me greatly during my fieldwork in Imphal. To Sir Aribam Syam Sharma, who, even though was not in the best of health, was able to see me for an interview in short notice and who was ever willing to provide me with various materials and information through emails and phones as well. I am also very grateful to Mr. Makhonmani Mongsaba who has been like a mentor to me and helping me unhesitatingly at all times and even helped me immensely in procuring various literature and films that are otherwise absent from the

MFDC library. He has shared his own collection of rare Manipuri films with me for the sake of my research and I am very grateful to him for that. To Mr. Herojit, I thank him for taking time to carefully explain and discuss various film and literature materials with me and for willingly providing me with journals, news clippings, films and pictures from his home archive. I also thank Mr. Hirom Romani, for willing to take time out for me and help me procure various information and material of the Film societies in Manipur. At age 93 he has thoroughly amused me with his amazing memory while describing and narrating the various events of the film society movement of Manipur.

To Mr. Rajkumar Bidur, I thank him for sharing his articles and books with me ever so willingly and for motivating me with various thoughts and ideas through his conversations with me that were helpful for my research. I am also grateful to Mr. Ronel Haobam, who has shared his documentary films with me and even arranged for me to meet with various other producers and directors in Imphal. To Mr. Sharatchandra at the Manipur Film Development Corporation, Imphal, who was helpful in providing me with various copies and souvenirs of the film festivals in Manipur. To Mr. Pradip Phanjoubam, Editor of 'Imphal Free Press', for sharing his views and insight on the situation of Manipuri Cinema in the present day. I also thank Mr. Sanzu Bachaspaty for taking time to speak with me on the various issues surrounding the documentary films in Manipur. At the same time, I am also grateful to Ms. Yenkhom Roma who willingly took time out to talk to me and share her experience of working in various Manipuri films as an actress and a film enthusiast.

My project would never have started if it were not for my family's love, support and prayers. I am eternally grateful to them for having faith in me even when I doubted myself. I am grateful to Ms. G.Ashin Panmei for opening her home for me for my stay during my visit to Imphal for fieldwork, and Jimmy Leivon, who has been very generous and helpful in taking me around in the city to meet various people and helping me especially with the translation of the language for communication with various producers, directors, video stockists, etc.

I thank God for giving me this opportunity and for enabling me to have come this far.

INTRODUCTION

Abstract

This dissertation attempts to identify and locate the practices of film making in Manipur in their economic, social and political manifestations within the broader context of a regional cinema practice in the Northeast region of India. As such, I have attempted to map the historiography of Manipuri cinema- tracing it from the 1970s as it began in celluloid until the late 90s and onwards that ushered in the era of digital film making in Manipur. While discussing Manipuri cinema and the rise of digital film making practice in Northeast India, this dissertation focuses mainly on the development of the styles, themes, genre and the content of this cinema in order to interrogate an identity that is culturally rooted and manifested in its film texts. Certain factors have also been interrogated in an attempt to identify this ‘Manipuriness’¹. For instance, the ban of Hindi entertainment in the state in 2000 ushered in a prospective market for young film makers in Manipur. Coupled with the prevalence of digital film technology, it encouraged a film culture that was inherently ‘Manipuri’, and could be culturally identified with by the Manipuri audience. I have also looked at the role of women in Manipuri cinema, which is deeply rooted within Manipur’s socio-cultural, political and economic context, and is also a factor that facilitates the understanding and identifying of the dominant themes, genre and content of Manipuri films. As such, identifying other factors like piracy, the influx of foreign film cultures,

¹ The term ‘manipuriness’ refers to the identity of Manipuri Cinema as an attempt to break away from the dominant Hindi culture prevalent especially in Bombay Cinema. It is a cultural phenomenon, manifested in their cinema, of emphasising on indigenous values and codes of the meitei Manipuri population.

especially the Korean New Wave², the film policies of the state, the presence and contribution of film societies, etc have facilitated my attempt to carry the discussion forward. Furthermore, in this dissertation, I have also emphasized the modes of production, distribution, exhibition and circulation of Manipuri cinema, contextualized within the socio-political and economic framework of the region in an attempt to identify an emergent film industry. While mapping the historiography of Manipuri cinema, I have stressed the life and oeuvre of Director Aribam Shyam Sharma who among a few others has pioneered a film culture in Manipur. While most of his films are discussed in the light of technology (celluloid to digital), culture and history, certain films like ‘*Imagi Ningthem*’, ‘*Ishanou*’ and ‘*Saphabee*’ have enabled me to discuss the role and significance of women in Manipuri Cinema.

I have also stressed upon the contemporary moment when digital film technology has emerged as the most important factor for the production and circulation of Manipuri cinema today. Furthermore, I have looked at the role and function of the Manipur Film Development Corporation (MFDC)³, Manipur Film Forum⁴, and other film organizations and film societies in the state to throw light on questions around the threats to and opportunities for Manipuri cinema in making a breakthrough and carving a niche for itself as a professional film industry⁵ within the framework of broader film practices in the region, nation and world.

² ‘Korean New Wave’, also known as ‘Hallyu’, refers to the South Korean cultural and media products that circulate in East and South East Asia, and are heavily consumed in the Northeast of India.

³ Manipur Development Corporation

⁴ Manipur Film Forum

⁵ I use the term ‘professional film industry’ and not ‘film practice’ purposely in this discussion as I am posing a debate about the emergence of a film industry in Manipur.

An Overview

To elaborate further, this dissertation has attempted to make an academic intervention on the issue of film cultures prevalent in the state of Manipur. It delves into the issues that surround the emergence of Manipuri cinema while laying out the political as well as the cultural history of Manipur in the post independence era. Manipur is a state unique from the other states in the Northeast in it that it is culturally entwined and deeply rooted in the Vaishnavite⁶ religion, absent in the other northeastern states. An account of the political history of the state which has been marked by insurgency and separatism for a long time has been specifically helpful in mapping the cultural issues of the struggles for identity and belonging that have had a deep imprint on the psyche of the people. This has enabled an understanding of the ethnic clashes among the indigenous groups within the state, and the hostility that is harbored towards the nation-state by certain insurgent groups that specially draws attention to the ban of Hindi entertainment and ‘Indian’ dress codes that have been seen by these groups as undermining the values of Manipuri culture. A strong documentary film practice has emerged as a form of expression that foregrounds the turbulence and insurgency of the region. Political issues around Human Rights Activist Irom Sharmila Devi and the imposition of AFSPA (Armed Forces Special Powers Act) in Manipur have influenced the works of documentary filmmakers from Manipur as well as outside the state and triggered a new trend of documentary filmmaking heavily centered around the propaganda and politics of the state and the role of women power in Manipur. Kavita Joshi’s documentaries *My body, My Weapon* and *Tales From the Margins*

⁶ Vaishnavism is a tradition of Hinduism, distinguished from other schools by its worship of Vishnu, or his associated Avatars such as Rama and Krishna, as the original and supreme God. This religion is popular and dominates the major population in Manipur, especially among the Meiteis

focus on Irom Sharmila's struggle for the repeal of the AFSPA. *Rude Awakening* by Sanzu Bachaspaty, *Life of Widows* by Chandam Netraj, *Mr. India* by Haobam Paban Kumar, *Manipur gi Punshi*, *Manipur and Sharmila*, *The face of our generation*, etc, are documentary films, to name a few, that reflect social issues like HIV and drug abuse, unemployment, poor education, domestic violence, the AFSPA rule, and other burning socio-political issues of the day. Documentary film-making has emerged as the dominant effective form of focusing upon issues of culture, identity, politics and propaganda. Given that the digital medium has emerged as a democratizing medium, it has provided for an expeditious mode of production, and has encouraged film makers to propagate ideas and issues in the documentary form.

There are four areas that have introduced Manipur in the international arena. They are Manipuri dance, Manipuri theatre, sport, and Manipuri cinema. Out of these, the area which conveys a vivid idea and perception of the identity and lifestyles of the Manipuri community is the medium of Manipuri cinema. I have looked at the experience of cinema as a culture in itself, and argued that this culture is reformed and modulated into a unique form in Manipur fashioned by the profuse influx of foreign film cultures⁷, political propaganda and socio-economic & cultural factors. India had the first screening of film on July 7, 1896 at the Watson Hotel in Bombay. Three decades after the invention of the novelty of cinema at the turn of the century, motion picture came to Manipur. Sound films were screened in Manipur from 1936, not much later than the release of the first Indian Talkie *Alam Ara* on March 14, 1931. Although attempts at film making in Manipur began in the mid 1930s, the breakthrough of professional film making was recognized only several years later in 1972, with the

⁷ Here, it refers to the Korean New wave Cinema, Hollywood cinema and the Indian Mainstream cinema.

release of the first Manipuri feature film, *Matamgi Manipur* (Today's Manipur) at the Usha Cinema and Friends Talkies in Imphal. It was a black and white film, and may be considered outdated since color film had by then dominated Indian cinema. But this marked the beginning of an era in the history of Manipuri cinema with the film awarded the President's Gold Medal at the National Film Festival the same year. Although produced by Karam Monomohan, it was directed by Debkumar Bose, a director from the Bengali film industry. Equipment and technicians were engaged from outside Manipur and most of the scenes were shot in studios in Calcutta. Also, in the years that followed, given the lack of film laboratory, film stock, technical expertise and financial funding, films made in Manipur were sent to Calcutta and Bombay for editing which considerably influenced the film language and style of Manipuri cinema. I have looked briefly at the engagement of Manipuri cinema with Bengali and Bombay cinema⁸ to interrogate the question of the 'Manipuri' identity of Manipuri films.

At another level, although '*Matamgi Manipur*' is undoubtedly seen as the first Manipuri feature, I have also pointed out that the film had a hired director from outside Manipur, who also did the screenplay, and that the film was produced under the supervision of Debaki Memorial Unit, Calcutta. In this sense, I have argued that the authenticity of the Manipuri regional cinema identity could be rethought. On the emergence of other regional cinemas in India, Selvaraj Velayutham, in the particular context of Tamil Cinema, has argued that the idea of Indian cinema is profoundly determined, reproduced and articulated through the lens of Bollywood, owing to its

⁸ 'Bengali Cinema', here, is in special reference to the dominant influence of the works of Satyajit Ray in the filmic style and language prevalent in the cinemas from the region of Bengal. 'Bombay Cinema', in this project, specially refers to the 50s era of Bombay Cinema which have come to influence Manipuri cinema in the 70s.

huge commercial success both in India and around the world, and that has marginalized and erased the rich complexities and ethno-linguistic specific cinematic traditions of other cinemas like Marathi, Gujarati, Telugu, Tamil, Assamese, Kannada, etc⁹. He states, “Hindi Cinema more often than not represents an ‘Indian’ without an ethno-specific identity” and because of the specificities of the language in other states, regional cinema always portrays the unique indigenous people and their culture in their films. As such, I have argued that if ‘Manipuri’ identity is to be identified in Manipuri regional cinema, one can perceive this in terms of the traditional culture, landscape and language of Manipur inherent in the narrative of the film.

Manipuri cinema can broadly be categorized into three eras – The Black & White Celluloid Era (1970s and 1980s), The Color Celluloid Era (1980s till early 2000) and the Video/Digital Film Era (1990s to date). Manipuri audiences witnessed silent Indian movies in the 1920s through touring Cinemas. Rudimentary and makeshift film show houses were established few years before the Second World War. Kasturichand Jain and Ramkumar were the pioneer film exhibitors. As at the beginning of Indian cinema, the exhibitors were the main patrons in making films, and hence it is that Ayekpam Biramangal, proprietor of Victory Cinema along with eleven other shareholders set up ‘Shri Govindajee Film Company’ in 1946 to make the popular play ‘*Mainu Pemcha*’ into film which was in Hindi. However, as per records, it remained an incomplete venture due to limited funds. Out of the fourteen reels that were completed, about nine selected pieces were released uncensored and unedited in the few cinema halls in Imphal.

⁹ Ed. Velayutham, Selvaraj. ‘*Tamil Cinema: The cultural politics of India’s other film industry*’. Routledge. Oxon & New York, 2008, p1, 7.

As cinema in other states had done at the beginning, Manipuri cinema also drew its resources from Manipuri theatre which has almost a century old tradition. The color era was inaugurated only in 1984 when the first Manipuri color feature film *Langlen Thadoi* directed by M.A. Singh was released. One could argue that Manipuri cinema was the result of the film society movement which inspired the idea of good cinema among Manipuri film makers and artistes. The first Film Society of Manipur, established in 1966 organized both Indian and foreign film festivals in the state and discussions on films were organized regularly. Another film society, the Imphal Cine Club set up in 1979, actively played the role of promoting good films through regular screenings and holding film festivals, seminars and appreciation courses. The Manipur Film Development Council was set up in 1980, and converted into a corporation in 1987. The objective of this corporation has been to develop, promote, aid, advice and assist the cinematograph trade and industry and all its allied kindred trades and businesses particularly of the construction and running of studios, laboratories, theatres and stages for the production of films. It also undertakes special measures for fostering and developing the Manipuri film industry by providing grants and financial assistance. It also serves to establish and maintain archives, museums and libraries of film and video.

Parallel to mainstream Indian cinema, other regional cinemas have also managed to attain the level of a commercial industry. While both Assamese and Manipuri cinema have been recognized to show caliber in the art of film making through various awards at the national and international levels, the notion of regional cinema in the North East has for long privileged the recognition of the Assamese film industry alone in terms of the number of films produced each year and with reference

to profitable income and financial gains. In contrast, film-making in Manipur can be argued to be a form of aesthetic expression and pursuit rather than an effective means of financial gains. The global film movement has recognized Manipuri cinema as a late arrival in the family of Indian cinema which is abundant in its cultural heritage, but is yet to be fully discovered. Despite having achieved various awards and recognition at the national and international levels, Manipuri cinema is yet to acquire the status of an industry that is marked with a unique cinematic identity which other regional cinemas have somewhat managed to achieve. At this point, I have set the articulation of aesthetic expression in the broader context of film marketing, production, distribution and circulation in an attempt to interrogate an emergent commercial film industry in Manipur. Sharmistha Gooptu argues that on account of the ban of new cinemas in West Bengal, and the economic phenomena in the region, Bengali Cinema had become more confined to a much restricted, but comparatively secure 'regional' market¹⁰. The same could be argued as true in the case of Manipuri cinema. However, in the dying phase of celluloid cinema in Manipur, the cost-effectiveness of digital film technology and the lack of threat from other popular film cultures in the 1990s underlined the rise of a market and audience, which fostered the circulation of the digital films within and outside the state and re-established a film making culture, but in the digital medium. Also, with an abundant resource of history, tradition and cultural heritage that has immense potential for the art of film-making, Manipuri cinema has also been predominantly a form of capturing, documenting and preserving the cultural identity of Manipuri society. In this sense, the practice of film-

¹⁰ Gooptu, Sharmistha. *'Bengali Cinema: An Other Nation'*. Routledge. Oxon & New York, 2011, p77, 79.

making today in Manipur can be understood not only as a commercial cinema, but also as art cinema, and a robust documentary film-making practice.

Furthermore, the film medium in Manipur survives under the threat of cable TV and video. At this juncture, the question of the survival of celluloid Manipuri films appears dim. However, Neikolie Kuotso has mentioned in his dissertation that with the cross-border transaction of cheap and pirated goods from across the border, new configurations in the economy and culture of the Northeast have been created¹¹. This fact has helped put forward the strategic location of Manipur for discussing trade and commerce with specific reference to technical equipment and goods that has ushered in the trend of digital filmmaking and the rise of the Manipuri film industry.

Reading Strategies and Research Methods

This dissertation has involved ethnographic fieldwork, theoretical and textual analysis of selected films, and a historiographical engagement with the emergence of Manipuri cinema as a regional film industry. Since much work has not been done on Manipuri Cinema, the nature of this project has relied for the major part of it, on the archive that was simultaneously created as I proceeded for the fieldwork. Apart from fieldwork I have also engaged theoretically with scholarship and discourse on film technology, genre, culture, politics and aesthetics. While trying to derive the characteristics of style, content and the quality of Manipuri cinema, it has been useful to refer to discussions around political consciousness and the social drives that structure the dominant plot motifs of Manipuri cinema, while also identifying synapses between its unique ‘Manipuri’ identity and the broader phenomenon of Indian Cinema revolving

¹¹ Kuotso, Neikolie. Unpublished M.Phil dissertation *Korean Wave in Northeast India: Rethinking Regional Film Cultures*. JNU, 2010.

around issues of the culture, nation, modern technology, developmental aesthetics, etc.

Textual analysis of selected films of the director Aribam Syam Sharma from the celluloid era has helped me to explain a unique style and pattern of Manipuri cinema prevalent in the 1970s and 1980s. This is an era that marked both the emergence of film culture and the slow death of the same until the late 1990s and early 2000s which saw the re-establishment of film practice and eventually, an emergent digital film industry. I have used selected films from the contemporary to question the dominant genre by tracing the presence of aesthetic and thematic content, while also analyzing the viewing and consumption habits of the audience/viewers in order to arrive at a standard pattern, if at all, arising from the relationship between recurrent image patterns, repeated plot motifs and popular consumption by the audience.

As far as the fieldwork is concerned, interviews were conducted with local **film directors and producers like** Aribam Shyam Sharma, Makhonmani Mongshaba, L. Surjakanta, Sanzu Bachaspaty, Binapani, Haobam Paban Kumar, Lancha, etc. **film critics, journalists, scholars** like Pradip Phanjoubam, Herojit, R.K. Bidur, Elangbam Natasha, Yambem Tombi, etc and members of **Film Societies and Organizations** like the Manipur Film Development Corporation (MFDC), Manipur Film Forum (MFF), Imphal Cine-club, All Manipur Film and Video Producers Association, Cine Artists and Technicians Association (CATA), All Manipur Matam Eshei Kanglup (AMEK), etc. Visits were also made to DVD suppliers and distributors (AJINAO stockists, Vicky stockists, etc), video library owners, local cinema theatres and local cable distributors. This fieldwork focused on finding and extracting first

hand information on issues around the history, technological film practice, distribution, Copyrights, Film policies, etc. I have attempted to investigate the popularity and circulation of Manipuri cinema in the local market as well as in the larger film market through such information. On the other hand, research on publications and literature –local articles, newspaper clippings, magazines, journals, film festival catalogs, souvenirs, memorabilia, online articles, blogs and websites related to Manipuri cinema were also looked at to assess the activities of film societies, festivals, seminars, workshops, theatres, etc. and also the popularity of this cinema propagated by the media.

Chapterization

Chapter 1: A Historiography of Manipuri Cinema

In this chapter I have discussed Manipuri cinema and its practices in all its economic, social, political and cultural manifestations and have focused on the problematic issues of the absence of laboratories, low funding, lack of technical expertise etc., to comment on the identity of Manipuri films in relation to Regional cinema and more widely Indian Cinema. In this chapter I have also identified Manipuri cinema as a transition from theatre, wherein, cultural history and the role of women in the performing arts have been briefly analyzed. Moreover, here I have attempted to focus more on the period from 1970s to 1990s, before the complete absence of Celluloid from early 2000. Primarily, I have traced the historiography and emergence of Manipuri cinema, while mapping the work and contributions of directors, producers and script writers like K. Ibohal Sharma, M. N Singh, Aribam Shyam Sharma, G.C

Tongbra, Arambam Somarendro, M.K Binodini, etc in identifying the content, styles and forms of the celluloid era in Manipur.

An emphasis on the Manipur Film Development Corporation and other Government organizations have enabled me to throw light on the quality, popularity, market and audience of Manipuri films. A discussion of film screenings and exhibition in cinema theatres and film festivals within and outside the state has also helped me to trace the potential of the industry for greater financial output.

Chapter 2: Aribam Syam Sharma and the Celluloid Documentary Films from Manipur(1972-2000)

In this chapter, I have focused on the contribution of the pioneering film maker of Manipur. Aribam Syam Sharma, a film director, actor, critic and music director from Manipur who came into the limelight with his award winning film '*Imagi Ningthem*' (My son my precious) that received the Grand Prix at the International Film Festival at Nantes, France, in 1982. He has contributed greatly to the field of cinema through his features, shorts, and documentaries. All his nine Manipuri feature films and twenty six non-feature films are deeply rooted in the socio-cultural milieu of Manipur, which has appealed to a global audience. His films have represented India at many International Film Festivals, and have won the National Award fifteen times already. This chapter has focused on his documentary and short films besides his acclaimed art films, making him an ardent filmmaker from Manipur in all film genres of feature, documentary and shorts.

His recognition both nationally and internationally has made him an involved film personality in the overall development and promotion of cinema in the North East region and his presence and role has been very important for the advancement of cinema in Manipur. It has been stated that it would be impossible to fathom and understand his films before knowing him in relation to his love for music. The lyricism, rhythm and the earthiness of his films are a legacy of his musical background, and I have attempted in this chapter to write a concise study of his engagement in the art of film making. Most of the discussion in this chapter has been based on an interview with him, as well as excerpts from his published autobiography, *Living Shadows*. This chapter has also focused on his close working relationship with the writer M.K. Binodini who has written and scripted most of his films, and it is from this collaboration that a unique cinematic content and style in his films has evolved. A discussion of the works and contributions of the writer M.K Binodini has also helped me to explore the influence and role of women in the thematic content of Manipuri films to better understand the ‘Manipuriness’ of Manipuri Cinema.

I have also used the discussions of his films to explain the experience and challenges of Manipuri cinema in its initial stages, and the journey of Manipuri Cinema from theatre and music to films, as well as the rise of a strong movement in documentary films among the upcoming filmmakers from the state. Through a textual analysis of his feature films like *Imagi Ningthem*(1982), *Ishanou* (1990) and *Saphabee* (1995),, I have engaged with the theoretical discourse on culture, genre and aesthetics in Manipuri film texts. A focus on his contributions to the field of short films and documentaries has enabled me to reiterate the aspect of ‘cinema as a medium for communication and not commerce’. His films have been studied in an

attempt to recognize and understand a novel film making practice in the region, bringing about what one could possibly call a Manipuri New Wave in the Celluloid era.

Chapter 3: The Contemporary Digital Films: New Manipuri Cinema Awakening

This chapter has focused on the emergence of new media technologies that has marked contemporary Manipuri cinema to be a digital film making practice which also engages with the socio-political situation in the state. In September 2000, a ban on Hindi satellite channels and Hindi entertainment was imposed declaring Hindi cinema as obscene and portraying values typical of India's Hindi-speaking heartland and with the potential to undermine Manipuri values. Having created an entertainment vacuum thereby in the state, this ban paved the way for aspiring film makers in Manipur to market their films to a found audience. This saw a trend of filmmaking in Manipur that embraced newer and cheaper forms of technology and equipment that made these digital films popular within and outside the state. This chapter has also posed the question that while a popular film making culture of both feature and documentary as well as short films has emerged, has the digital medium been able to foster a stable film industry in Manipur? Moreover the chapter has also investigated the aesthetic quality of Manipuri cinema in the contemporary scenario.

In 2001, the Kanglei Yawol Kanna Lup(KYKL)¹⁴ called for a ban on women wearing attire and the dress codes that resembled 'mainland' Indian saris, salwar-kameez, etc. I have used this ban as an entry point to further discuss the role of women in Manipuri cinema and what the significance of the 'Manipuriness' is that

contemporary films subscribe to while probing into aspects of genre and style. Such an investigation has drawn insights not only from contemporary feature films, but more specifically from the active participation and contribution of young documentary film makers. Their documentary films are centrally constituted by contemporary and current social issues and can be seen as a form of representation and expression of a struggle for identity that is deeply rooted in the political turbulence underlying the socio- cultural and political framework of the state. A concise study and discussion of the emergence of the documentary and short film culture in Manipur has been attempted in relation to the medium of video and digital films, while also examining the networks of the market and the production, distribution and circulation chain.

Conclusion: Interrogating the Manipuri Film Industry

In spite of the abundant cultural and artistic potential that is apparent in the awards that Manipuri Cinema has received in the national and international arenas, factors like the absence of a larger market, persisting low funds, the lack of more trained film artists, poor infrastructure and the underlying insurgency in the state, continue to pose the question of the survival of such a film practice as a flourishing industry. In this concluding chapter, I have discussed the threats and opportunities, strengths and weaknesses of Manipuri cinema and have directed attention to the practice of filmmaking in Manipur not merely as an artistic pursuit but as an economic professional venture, and have attempted to rethink the significance of Manipuri cinema as a durable film industry. Or rather, I have posed the question as to whether it

can be called an industry at all? I have also discussed the various recommendations that have otherwise been put forward by the Manipur Film Development Corporation to the State Government for the implementation of a State Film Policy which is clearly still absent in the film making practice environment of Manipur. While this Film Policy ceases to exist, I have discussed the survival of Manipuri cinema dearly dependent on the various activities undertaken by the Manipur Film Development Corporation and the Manipur Film Forum in ushering in awareness, and expanding the horizons and market of Manipuri films through the organizing of various Film Festivals, symposiums, workshops etc. within and outside the State.

CHAPTER I

MANIPURI CINEMA: TRACING A FILM HISTORIOGRAPHY

For a meaningful introduction to Manipuri Cinema, it is necessary to know a little more about Manipur. For one thing, very little is known about this tiny state. For another, it is essential to an understanding of a Manipuri film. Where the Tropic of Cancer cuts the hill ranges that descend from the Himalayas to the Bay of Bengal, dividing the Indian sub-continent from South East Asia, lies a small lush valley, a former lakebed of about 700 sq. miles, 25,000 ft. above sea level. This valley inhabited by the 'Meiteis' of Tibeto-Burman extractions forms not only the geographical but also the economic political and cultural nucleus of Manipur. The Meiteis, numbering slightly less than a million have developed a range of cultural dance-forms, music, theatre and the literary tradition with a distinct script. These forms of cultural expression have been continually enriched and refined right through the historical phases of Manipur; from the establishment of the semi-feudal monarchy, the adoption of Vaishnavism, the arrival of British rule in 1891, to the accession of the native state to the Indian Union in 1949. What is distinctive about these cultural forms is the persistence of a startling degree of folk and community participation- a pointer to the tribal origins of the 'Meiteis'. The latest in this line is Manipuri Cinema.

The writing of a film history may usually be accompanied with a sense of anxiety over the limited information of events and facts that the literature and documents can provide. While writing for such a film history as that of Manipuri Cinema one could get more apprehensive given that it being a lesser known and

unpopular cinema in the consciousness of the nation, there is hardly any literature or material that one can access for an in depth study. In the early part of July 2007, the only organization in Manipur that would otherwise have offered a compensation to this anxiety met with a tragic fate when a fire destroyed most of the archive of films and literature that was collected and preserved since the release of the first Manipuri feature film in 1972. The Manipur Film Development Corporation Ltd. (MFDC) was formed in 1987 when it was incorporated under the Companies Act of 1956(No.1 of 1956) which took over the erstwhile Manipur Film Development Council(1980) along with their assets and liabilities. In the process of developing, promoting and assisting the Cinematograph trade and industry in Manipur as the main objective, the MFDC had also maintained an archive of most materials- films and documents and was the apex body in governing the film making and production scenario, as well as film screening and film marketing in the State. Come 2007 and if one makes any inquiry about Manipuri Cinema one is left to rely on the unstable memories of people which cannot be fully validated even by the few retrieved copies of documents and literature after the fire. Neikolie Kuotso¹ has expressed in his dissertation that while writing about Northeast India's early encounters with cinema, he has had to rely on writings, journalistic or otherwise, the vestiges of colonial records related to cinema and the narratives of various people and unstable memories, which are in fact hard to come by. The writing of its historiography can alternatively be the outcome of such an analysis of how and why certain social, political and cultural events that have taken place in the region affected the premises of the film making industry in Manipur and how its films and filmmakers have come to influence their audience and be

¹ Neikolie Kuotso's M,Phil dissertation on 'Korean wave in Northeast India: Rethinking regional film cultures' 2010 explores the 'Hallyu' cinema from Seoul along with the phenomenon of globalization and the circuits of film circulation from South Korea in Northeast India.

recognized by other film centers globally as well. Thus, in retrospect, the nature of this analysis could reflect, for instance, on the very establishment of the MFDC just a few years from the release of its first feature film, and direct a certain understanding of the vision, attitude and sentiments that the people from this tiny state, Manipur, possess towards their own cinema. There are four areas that introduce Manipur in the international arena- Manipuri dance that has been recognized and nurtured at Santiniketan² as one of the classical dance forms in the country, Manipuri theatre that has evolved from their traditional '*Sumang Lila*' dramatics, sport (Polo), and Manipuri cinema. Manipuri Cinema has shown glimpses of brilliance that was almost at once noticed and recognized at its very first attempt, and whose texts conjure images and visuals that underline an honest perception of the life, the people and the culture from Manipur. But before we discuss the emergence of this cinema any further, it becomes necessary to look into Manipuri theatre in shaping the aesthetics and artistic attributes of the early cinemas from Manipur.

The Manipuri '*Sumang Lila*' and exploring the 'Manipuriness' of Manipuri Cinema

Theatre worldwide has been acknowledged as a precursor of cinema. India, in general, has had a strong affinity with the art of the theatre and dramatics since time immemorial. The emergence of Manipuri Cinema, like most other regional cinemas in India and other World Cinemas, is not very different. Manipuri Cinema had its

² Shantiniketan, popularly identified these days as a university or college township, a hundred miles to the north of Kolkata, has been initially an ashram established by Debendranath Thakur, father of the great Nobel Prize Winner, Rabindranath Tagore. Most of the inspiration of the initial Manipuri Cinema have evolved from Bengali literature and films, where directors like Aribam Syam Sharma found his platform of his love for music and the arts to be nurtured.

sustenance and support from the Manipuri theatre which has been a vibrant form of performing art for almost a century. Drama started in Manipur in *yatra* from since several centuries, encouraged by the kings. It started taking the shape of modern drama during the early part of this century with inspiration from Bengali dramas and with the formation of the 'Manipuri Dramatic Union' formed in 1931. The 'Rupmahal Artists Association' was formed in 1943 to give a greater impact to this art form. '*Sumang lila*³' is a type of theatre that originated as a performance in the backyards and lawns of the Palace, and today, it is performed in houses and lawns during any function or celebration, especially during weddings and birthdays, and has become an inherent artistic expression and cultural tradition of the Meiteis which backgrounds the strong artistic movement of Manipuri theatre within and outside the state. In Manipuri theatre, what is artistically accomplished is the exploration of a physical, rather than psychological language, which is of a physico-psychic identity deeply rooted in the ethno-social tradition of Manipur. It looks into the renewal of ancestral tradition as a challenge, guided not by method but more by instinct and intuition. The Manipuri theatre is a combination of *thangta*, *sankirtana*, several tantric forms and spiritual symbols. It reflects the eminence of a view of human nature which goes beyond the boundaries of caste, culture and tradition, as something malleable and capable to control and transmutate and thus succeed where causal and discursive dramaturgy might fail. Such attributes can be seen manifested in their cinemas as well. To cite a situation, in Manipuri culture, it comes across as rude and offending should a younger member of the family cross the path of an elder without a gesture of lowering the head and putting his hand forward in a respectful way. These body gestures and movement and what they signify are easily identifiable by the Manipuri

³ 'Sumang' in the Meiteilon language means 'Lawn or backyard' and 'Lila' as 'play or drama'.

audience. To a non-Manipuri audience this would appear as an 'excessive' dramatic gesture. In another example, given a dramatic situation of conflict on the part of the woman, a predominantly non-verbal dramaturgy deeply rooted in their culture, through a manifestation of songs, cries, lullabies and evocation of dreams in the narration of the plays of Manipuri theatre may alert its spectators to the resilience of the human spirit the woman may possess in countering the dominant tension of contemporary times in a mimetic fashion. Loud verbal outbursts and extroverted expressions, especially by Manipuri women are considered inappropriate or unbecoming in their society. In their cinemas, therefore, the character portrayal of a female protagonist as one with noble and virtuous qualities and emancipated and liberated is done ironically through more 'restricted' body gestures and movement. This is also observed in traditional Manipuri dances, where tiny and soft footsteps and slow hand movements renders them graceful and 'womanly' rather than a vibrant heavy movement of their hands and feet. Such festivals like the 'Lai Harouba' in Manipur can witness these dance forms and they identify with Manipuri culture in their theatre and eventually cinemas. '*Ishanou*' by Aribam Syam Sharma is one such film that is set against the background of the 'Lai Harouba' festival. In Manipuri theatre, therefore, intensely lyrical in their dream like patterns of movement, the actors build their narrative logically through a fluid montage of gestures that is capable of reaching to the audience in vastly different social and cultural contexts, thus, breaking the verbal language barrier. Ultimately it becomes a language incarnated by the being of the actor, which is physically enacted in a process of evoking the emotion in a stream of images, in a continuous, kaleidoscopic transformation beyond mere drama and representation.

Borrowing from the concepts of Heisnam Kanhailal, the Manipuri theatre is extremely localized (in opposition to the present day fascination of the local being internationalized in view of the romantic and blind glorification of the past with a superficial motive of exportation) wherein the theatre artists endeavor to learn afresh the native lore traveling throughout the nooks and corners of Manipur to strengthen their creative will in portraying the identity of the native people. Manipuri theatre commits to the identity, nationalism, and difference in the exploring of an outlet to channel the silent feelings/emotions and instincts of the 'marginalized' people of Manipur. It can be argued, therefore, that Manipuri theatre does not completely appeal to traditionalists or the so called sophisticated modern and western minds that are, according to Kanhailal, upholding works of frozen aesthetics, but rather, challenges the popular city theatre and critics of academic and intellectual exercise in performing somewhere in between, as an alternate original theatre. As such, Manipuri theatre can be interrogated in their cinemas which have for the past few decades placed the Manipuri people and their culture in the map of international Cinemas, rendering a certain 'manipuriness' in their films.

Manipuri women have played a significant role in the emergence of Manipuri cinema through their contributions as writer, actor, playback singer, lyricist, etc. I have attempted to identify a certain meaning of 'manipuriness' in their films through the functional roles of the women in Manipur in the field of the Arts and Performing Arts and also as the dominant subject of their films, reflecting upon the overall cultural status of women in their society. Firstly, the stories and scripts of most acclaimed Manipuri films have been written through the lens of an acclaimed writer like M.K.Binodini. Secondly, their films have a strong portrayal of women as

protagonists, observed from the very beginning of their attempts at cinema in making '*Madhabi*' (taken from their literature and theatre). '*Brojendrogi Luhongba*' (1972), '*Saphabee*' (1976), '*Imagi Ningthem*' (1981), '*Ishanou*' (1990), '*Sambal Wangma*' (1993), '*Madhabee*' (1993), '*Mayophygee Macha*' (1994) and '*Khamba Thoibi*' (1997), to name a few, are films that are heavily based upon women, whose roles play a vital part in carrying the narration forward. Interestingly, the roles of women in the plays of Manipuri Theatre were initially performed by male actors. One of the reasons, as Yenkhom Roma⁴ expressed, was the low percentage of educated and literate young women as compared to the men who in the patriarchal system were favored to get education even in low economic conditions. Therefore, as fewer women were present, opportunities in the theatre that required the reading and rehearsing of scripts were found more for the male actors. For quite some time, this became a stereotypical identity of the Manipuri theatre. A unique phenomenon in the area of drama and dramatics is identified in the history of the Manipuri theatre. The convincing artistic (drama and acting) skill of the Manipuri male artiste, comfortably resonating between the character role playing of a male and female, and managing to get past the boundary of gender in their dramaturgy brought in a new dimension of profundity in the identity of the Manipuri theatre. At the same time, it is also a known fact that men played the female roles when cinemas first started in India. This trend continued until some educated women came forward to join films. As Yenkhom Roma notes, Kanmala Devi Chattopadhyay was one such lady, to whom Manipur's Thambal Devi can be likened. Devi, a popular theatre actress was in the title role of

⁴ As mentioned in an interview with the author. She is a well known actress from Manipur whose journey in acting began from the drama stage rather than the theatre and was cast the main female role for the first Manipuri feature in 1972 '*Matamgi Manipur*'.

the film '*Mainu Pemcha*', adapted from a popular theatre play. Another highly talented female artiste Ngangbi Devi was the playback singer for the film.

With the gradual movements and developments in Theatre (and education), more women began to join the theatre-also probably as an extended emancipation of their status in the performing rituals and ceremonies in the temples and palaces in their society. Today their role and performance is undisputedly prominent and dominant. Several theatre-groomed female artistes have shifted to acting in feature films. Tondon Devi lent her singular charm to the success of '*Olangthagee Wangmadsoo*' (1981). Likewise, Manbi Devi's roles in the films '*Ishanou*' (1990) and '*Saphabee*' (1976) strike out as an alluring factor to the success and wide acclaim of these films. Her role as a '*Maibi*' Priestess in '*Ishanou*' remains one of the finest performances in the portrayal of a woman caught between an ancient occult practice and a 'normal' life in modern Manipur. G.Ibeyaima Devi's performance in '*Yairipok Thambalnu*'(1984) as well as Lourembam Pishak Devi in '*Mayophygee Macha*'(1994) are among some of the few others who have been contributory factors to the overall appreciation of Manipuri films through the portrayal of Manipuri women to showcase their culture.

The most renowned Manipuri theatre today , Kalakshetra Manipur⁵, established in 1969 is devoted to the study, revival and projection of the culture of Manipur through the art of theatre, setting itself amongst some of the highest standards of performance to match not only the best in the country but in the world theatre scene as well. Performing beyond just a production company, it subscribes to

⁵ Established on 19th July 1969 with Heisnam Kanhailal as founder-director and whose wife Smt. Sabitri, the chief collaborator, an actress of extraordinary power to enter and transcend the most turbulent state of emotions, have together nurtured the vision of Kalakshetra, and have evolved one of the most subtle training systems to contemporary Indian actors.

the notion of a workshop that is more of a laboratory or research centre- seeking to experiment in a continuous process of ‘renewal of ancestral tradition’ for a contemporary cultural expression. In this way, Kalakshetra attempts to break away from the established trend of the contemporary theatre as being a national stereotype.⁶

At this point, a female theatre artist such as Sabitri Heisnam, trained and performing from under this banner and principle has come to reconfigure the role of the Manipuri woman in contemporary times, not just in feature films but in documentaries even more. Sabitri is well remembered for her role in the play ‘Draupadi’, directed by her husband Heisnam Kanhailal. Sadanad Menon of Tehelka mentions that the origins of Imphal’s naked protest⁷ lies in Manipuri theatre where the women merely repeated the act of one of Manipur’s (and India’s) greatest actresses that she performed on stage. Menon further expressed that it was clear even as one watched the play in the comfort of the theatre space, that Sabitri’s outrage and passion in her ultimate act of resistance was not merely ‘drama’ but was indicative of the social energy and force behind it. One can notice the drastic modifications being drawn in with respect to the role and performance of the female artiste in Manipuri theatre. Abiding and conforming to contemporary times, the modern Manipuri theatre has found a significant place in documentary film genres as well. Therefore, it is not surprising that the element of variation in Manipuri Cinemas (feature films and documentary films alike) in terms of its inspiration and talent that provides the local flavor is by and large derived from the Manipuri theatre.

⁶ As expressed in their literature, they hope to achieve this by practicing and accomplishing a theatre language- physical rather than psychological- at the instance of instinct and intuition in the context of ethno-social traditions of Manipur.

⁷ In 2006, at the backdrop of strong military insurgency, twelve Manipuri women disrobe in public as a protest against the harrowing murder and death of a school girl Manorama Devi by the army personnels of the Assam Rifles in Imphal, Manipur.

Screening of films and Exhibition sites in Manipur (1930s)

Moving pictures arrived at Manipur two decades after the invention of the novelty of cinema. People identified it as 'Basikop' (a corrupted expression of Bioscope), a highest form of entertainment among the urban folk. The Bioscope came to Manipur from the expansion of the show business by the Pathe Company of France and Calcutta's Royal Bioscope Company of Hiralal Sen. As R.K Bidur expressed in one of his writings, the Bioscope came to Manipur ultimately from the extension of the era of Film d' Art and its dominance in the Indian film market at a time when the emergence of the Talkie gave all the more impetus to the expanding cinema business. Manipur's acquaintance with the Bengali cinema scenario has been observed from the very beginning through forms of trade and commerce in the film making business. But unlike how the businessmen or exhibitors from Calcutta and Manipur operated in this novel business, a more local contact of the first cinemas was brought to the Manipuri audience through the '*bioscopewallah*'.⁸ There was one Leisang Laipuba⁹, Manipur's only bioscopewallah before the outbreak of World War II. According to reports, this show continued till the early 1950s after which it has hardly been seen again in Manipur for by that time, cinema halls had been constructed and film exhibitors became the sole source of the cinemas for the public. Unlike screening in the tent on the parks and empty lots of Bombay, Calcutta, Madras, etc., the screening

⁸ The '*bioscopewallah*' is a local reference, borrowed from the Hindi language, to the person carrying and exhibiting the bioscope in the local markets, and in this case, in Imphal.

⁹ 'Leisang' is the shortened form of the of the surname 'Leisangthem' and 'Laipuba' denotes the carrier of the box of moving picture. His real name was Leisangthem Ngouba. Positioning himself at a convenient place by the roadside in the largest market in Imphal, Khwairamband, he would beat the 'dholak' hung down from his neck and play the cymbal alternately shouting "*Eibu yeng-ge yengu, laibu yeng-ge yengu*", meaning "*Either look at me or look at this moving picture*".

of films in Manipur was held at the Royal Palace, the cantonment hall (4th Assam Rifles) and the Victoria club hall in Babupara.

During the year 1931, India produced 27 talkie films including three Bengali films, and one each of Tamil and Telugu films. But half a decade after the release of the first Indian Talkie '*Alam Ara*' in 1931, the Sound film arrived in Manipur and was screened only in 1936. '*Prahlad*', a mythological Hindi film was screened at the Manipur Talkie House¹⁰, the first proper cinema hall in Manipur. Tickets for cinema shows were printed at the *Churachand Printing Works*¹¹. Before long, another cinema house, Ramkumargee Hall¹², came into existence that did not run shows for long. However, a prominent cinema house established before the war, Diana Talkie¹³, a partnership enterprise of three film enthusiasts and business entrepreneurs¹⁴, exhibited the most number of pictures regularly till the day of the bombing of Imphal on May 10, 1942. The last picture screened here was '*Mei Hari*'.¹⁵ Cinema houses were rapidly set up in the 1930s in Manipur. Sougajam Nabakumar constructed a cinema house called '*Chitrangada*'¹⁶. Dada Saheb Phalke's '*Raja Harishchandra*' was screened at this cinema hall. It is also known that other lesser known talkie houses were set up during the 1939-1940 period but there is no proper record to support this fact. In fact, all the cinema houses ceased to exist at the outbreak of war. During the

¹⁰ It was more popularly known as 'Kasturige Hall' (which translates to Kasturi's Hall) as the owner of the Hall was Kasturi Chand Saraogi. It was situated at a place near the present Hind Jalpan Hotel in paona Bazar in Imphal. It no longer exists today as most cinema halls in Manipur closed down post war and the given the politico-socio situation with the onset of rising insurgency in the region.

¹¹ Situated at Sagolband Meino Leirak in Imphal, they made brisk business in the 1930s as more cinema halls began to appear in the city.

¹² Situated at the Awang Dukan in Thangal Bazar, Imphal. Some recall that it might probably be the Imphal Talkie House that exists today. However, there is no formal presentation of facts to validate this statement.

¹³ Today 'Friends Talkies' have replaced this very hall which closed down post World War II.

¹⁴ Vikharam, Jainarayan Maheshwari and Gurumayum Gunzani Sharma.

¹⁵ As recorded by R.K Bidur in his article 'Manipuri Cinema: A recountal' published in the souvenir of '25 years of Manipuri Cinema, MFDC, Manipur'.

¹⁶ Today, in its place, the Manipur State Road Transport Corporation now stands.

years of War- between mid and late forties- 'Friends Talkies', 'Victory Cinema', 'MNB Cinema'¹⁷ and 'Imphal Talkies' were set up.

By the early 1930s other cities in the nation had already been exposed to the audio-visual medium and had even started producing and making their own films. But with the onset of Sound films only later in the mid 1930s in Manipur, the brisk business in cinema shows created a strong apprehension in the minds of the socialists in Imphal. The general feeling was that the talkie cinema would soon drain away the economy. Under the leadership of Hijam Neta-Irabort, many meetings were held at different places in Imphal to stir up the public and to display agitations against the prevalence of cinema¹⁸. However, during this time there also rose a group of individuals- intellectuals, film enthusiasts, journalists, critics- who supported the screening and employment of cinemas to the public. In view of the survival of cinema and screenings in the state, Hirom Romani Singh amongst other influential intellectuals in Manipur formed the first Film Society in Manipur. Although registered much later in 1966 as 'Imphal Film Society', it strove to bring awareness and acceptance of cinema among the people of the state when faced with such agitations as mentioned above. With the gradual rise and spread of this art medium, cinema thus came to stay and became very much a part of the Manipuri's life. However, up until 1972, Manipuri films were not heard of. Manipur joined the race of film making in India seventy five years late. Indian Cinema which had caught up with the west in the first quarter of the century had already made long strides in the global race while the Manipur film chapter saw the light of day after the second World War.

¹⁷ It was ultimately dissolved after the War.

¹⁸ As told by R.K Bidur, there were big rallies and protests on the road, condemning the talkie cinema- singing and shouting all the way: '*Talkie cinema we shall boycott, Motherland beckons us. Ruthless cinema has put her in dire strait! Lets cry in a chorus, Talkie cinema we shall boycott!*'.

Emergence of Film making in Manipur

The practice of film making in Manipur began with attempts at making documentary films in the 1930s. Manipuri Cinema began when Maharajah Kumar Priyobarta Singh¹⁹ made actuality films in 1936. M.K. Priyobarta may be compared with Harishchandra Sakharam Bhadwadekar, the Father of Indian documentary cinema. H.S Bhatwadekar was hypnotized by the Lumiere Brothers' cinematographe shows. He purchased a motion picture camera from London and started immediately to film various events and objects of certain interest in 1898. In a similar fashion, M.K Priyobarta was enchanted by the 'Charlie Chaplin' films he had seen regularly at Raipur, Central Province, where he received his education. Acting on the advice of Col. Dr. Taylor, Civil Surgeon of Manipur Hospital at that time, he then purchased an 8mm movie camera and went on filming socio-cultural events and other happenings in the existing milieu and made many trips to places in and out of Manipur. Although his films were not candid camera work, his covering of '*Hiyang Tannaba*' (Boat race in the Royal boat) as mentioned in the writing of R. K Bidur²⁰ was textured with imagination and expression where he tackles the actuality shots with certain degree of success and channels his message through the given natural materials. Although his films are nowhere to be procured today, they were at one time screened at the Royal palace. They were also shown at the Chitrangada Natya Mandir Hall with tickets being sold for the screening. The war and his becoming Chief Minister of Manipur at the end of the War pushed him away from continuing as a film maker. Although this makes him the pioneer at film making in Manipur, the art of making films was still to

¹⁹ (Late) M.K Priyobarta is the second son of His highness Maharaja Sir Churachand Singh of Manipur.

²⁰ Taken from his article titled 'Manipuri Cinema: a Recountal' published in the souvenir 'Celebration of 25 years of Manipuri Cinema 1972-1997' by MFDC.

be mastered by certain individuals in this region. He had expressed that his objective of filming was to preserve records in celluloid for future²¹ generations. On May 26, 1998, Cine Artistes and Technicians' Association (CATA) organized a screening of 7 documentaries that M.K. Priyobarta could retrieve from his some 50, for the film critics, the artiste-technicians, the film enthusiasts and The Press. As proved prophetic, his documentaries are preserved as records of the Manipuri people and the traditional Manipuri culture which cannot be witnessed today, like the Boat race among others, which used to be an annual event during the reign of the Maharajah in the former princely state.

The making of 'Mainu Pemcha' (1946)

At the beginning of Indian Cinema, exhibitors were the main patrons of film-making. Likewise, the exhibitors in Manipur made their contribution to the film movement in Manipur. Even though Manipur was threatened with World War II, artistic and cultural activities were performed without any sign of perturbation as the singing and dancing performed at the temples were observed regularly. During this time, Ayekpam Biramangal, proprietor of Victory Cinema, along with eleven other shareholders²² set up the 'Shree Govindajee Film Company' in 1946-47 to make the popular play on Manipur's '*Mainu Pemcha*'²³ into a film. The team had collaborated with a Bengali Filmmaker, Rathin Sen for the production of this film. In the

²¹ As expressed in an interview with R.K.Bidur who has mentioned the same in his article 'Writing as I please' 2010.

²² Although all of the eleven shareholders are not known or have been forgotten, some of them were Sougaijam Nabakumar, Sinam Krishnamohan

²³ 'Mainu Pemcha' is a popular play production by the Rupmahal theatre in Manipur written by noted playwright Ayekpam Shyamsunder. The story of Mainu Pemcha is a true, romantic tragedy where she commits suicide due to a misunderstanding between her and her lover.

commercial sense, being pessimistic about a viable market for Manipuri films, it was decided to shoot the film in Hindi to cater to a larger audience even outside of Manipur and for which technicians and stock were contacted from Calcutta, including the Director, Debkumar Bose. To ensure greater popularity the hero was also cast from Calcutta, Bimol Chatterjee, who was just an emerging actor back then. However, this maiden venture met with rough weather from all sides and crashed midway. As Aribam Syam Sharma expressed in his film biography²⁴, this uneventful outcome was the result of ill assessment of the film making art by the producers. The producers were not yet exposed to such a production and therefore lacked the knowledge of how much a film production would cost, and how challenging it could be with lack of trained technicians and stocks. This was an attempt born out of commercial interest and an aesthetic pursuit with a fool hardy attitude. At the same time, R.K Bidur mentions that Manorama Year Book 2002 ascribed this fiasco to the rampant cheating and swindling in the Calcutta Studios. Whatever may be the reason, the outlook of film making among the Manipuri people appeared grim ever since '*Mainu Pemcha*' and the tempo naturally died down to a low ebb for several decades. As can be observed, this project became a Hindi film from Manipur and it becomes problematic to authenticate it as an original Manipuri film, as most would like to argue, because it was made to cater to an 'outer' audience. It was technically crafted and shot by technicians and cameramen from Calcutta, even the main hero was a non-Manipuri and there was no input from the Manipuri people except in the form of the story and finance. Imphal then had three Cinema Halls. Selected pieces of about nine reels (out of the fourteen reels that were shot altogether) were released uncensored and unedited at these halls during that time as added attraction to the main screenings. This project,

²⁴ '*Living Shadows*' published by the Guwahati Cine Club, Assam.

however unfruitful, was the first undertaking of any film making project in the state which served as a platform and contact with the local film enthusiasts like K. Ibohal Sharma, M.A Singh, Aribam Syam Sharma, etc. who later came along and became renowned film makers of Manipuri films and brought about the New wave of Manipuri Cinema. K. Ibohal Sharma has come to be known as the first Cameraman in Manipur who later produced his own films and even set up a studio and a lesser known film institution in Imphal²⁵.

The ‘silent era’ and the launch of Manipuri New Wave Cinema (1960s-70s)

Undaunted by the earlier abortive attempt to make a Manipuri film, Kongbrailatpam Ibohal Sharma, a professional photographer, took up the film making venture. He had a feverish interest in cinematography that led him to purchase an old 16mm Bolex camera not much in vogue. Ibohal Sharma went on to shoot seven silent features- ‘*Ningthemcha Ahum*’ (1960), ‘*Ichel*’ (1961), ‘*Mongpham*’ (1962), ‘*Cultural Heritage*’ (1964), ‘*Imphal Diary-Part I and II*’ (1965-68). He was the producer, writer, cameraman and director of all his films. Eventually he set up a studio and a laboratory which was equipped with indigenous devices and means to get the films developed, edited and printed. Quite rightly, he became the first Manipuri cameraman after experimenting with and exploring a vast range of techniques and means to make films indigenously and economically. The small fund that he could amass was not enough to make his silent films talk. In those days there were no departments or institutions that catered to technical film development and maintenance. Instead dialogue and

²⁵ Known as ‘X-Cine’ studios, it has survived the roughest of economic setbacks in the state and still exist to this day unlike other studios that have closed down post war. This business has been gradually taken over by his sons who have treaded the lines of photography and videography.

music settings were provided by playing a tape from behind the screen very much like how the pianos, harmonium, tablas, etc. were utilized in the days of the silent films. He screened all his films at no cost or ticket fee which makes it quite evident that his objective in the art of film making was more of an artistic pursuit than for commercial gains. While other 'Indian cinemas' had progressed with Sound in their films, the 1960s may be described as the late entry of the 'silent era' of Manipuri Cinema into the larger family of Indian Cinema and World Cinema. But just as cinemas around the globe started off, Manipuri cinema could also be given a place in the global film movement, later than never.

During this time, film makers like Satyajit Ray, Ritwik Ghatak, Mrinal Sen, Shyam Benegal, Grirish Karnad, Kumar Shahani, Mani Kaul, M.S Sathyu, etc. sprung up from various corners of the country and created a new identity for Indian Cinema nationally and internationally with a film making practice radically different from the formula films of the 70s. The 1970s saw the launch of the 'Indian New Wave'. After the initial driving force of the 60s in Manipur, the 'Indian New Wave' influenced and brought about the birth of Manipuri Cinema.

Most film critics from Manipur have opined that '*Matamgi Manipur*' (Today's Manipur) has the first place of being the first Manipuri feature film. While some are of the opinion that '*Brojendragi Luhongba*' (Brojendra's Marriage) is more aptly the first 'authentic' Manipuri feature because it was produced, written and shot by local Manipuri technicians under the stewardship of producer and director Sapam Nodia Chand from Manipur as opposed to the technicians and directors that were employed from Calcutta for the former film. Both films that relied on and depended on the Calcutta Studios for equipment and stock were released in the same year 1972 with

the latter just two months after the former. Some film critics have even mentioned that the latter was produced only a year after in 1973. However, it was nevertheless 1972²⁶ that marked the beginning of a professional film making journey in Manipur. '*Matamgi Manipur*' that released on 9th April 1972, was based on a famous stage play of Aryan Theatre's 'Tirtha Jatra' and written by the eminent Manipuri playwright Arambam Somorendra. Deb Kumar Bose²⁷ from Calcutta, whose presence was initially felt in the making of '*Mainu Pemcha*' as Director was again given the responsibility of writing and directing the feature film when approached by the Producer Karam Monomohan Singh who had been toying with the idea of producing a film in Manipuri. K. Monomohan Singh was a pioneering figure for the development of Manipuri Cinema. He also produced the first documentary in Manipur, '*Maipak, Son of Manipur*' in 1971. In the same year as '*Matamgi Manipur*', he also made the documentary '*First Statehood Day Celebration*'. He opened cinema halls at places that were far from the capital city. '*Sanagi Machu*' was a documentary he started but could not complete and is nowhere to be seen today. He was enthusiastic in promoting the Meitei Mayek and used this script in the title casting of '*Matamgi Manipur*'. At this venture, Aribam Syam Sharma, a renowned film maker today, was cast as one of the actors and also supervised as the Music Director. The actress, Yenkhom Roma, after several auditions was selected for the main role despite any previous acting experience, even in theatre. This film was the outcome of sincere and serious efforts from all the departments owing much to the help from the Calcutta crew and Bengali Cinema in general. While only a few shots for landscapes were taken in Imphal, the entire film was shot in Calcutta in a studio giving the film the

²⁶ Even historically, one can remember that it was in this same year that Manipur became a state of India.

²⁷ Son of Debaki Bose, a famous Bengali Film Director during 1930-40.

visual appeal of the early 60s Bombay Cinema. It was a black and white film when Color films dominated Indian Cinema. Ingrained with a certain regional taste and a contemporary story that backgrounds the local social and cultural life in Manipur, this film went on to bag the President's Gold Medal Award in the National Film Festival the same year it was released, although, when it was released in Imphal prior to the award, the reception and response by the audience was very poor. This turned around quickly when the film was released again after its screening in Delhi. It seemed as though the Manipuri people did not have faith in their own cinema. Such an achievement can be said to be the good outcome of the film society movement that was simultaneously taking place wherein both Indian and foreign film festivals were organized in the State and regular discussions were conducted. Thus, with '*Matamgi Manipur*' Manipuri Cinema though born late, sprang up with a brilliant start achieving flying colours overnight and a serious recognition for its films, awakening Manipuri film goes to the reality of a Manipur feature film for the first time.

Shortly after, Sajiata Films' '*Brojendrogi Luhongba*' was released. It is rumored that both these films began production at the same time but due to a period of financial constraint to complete the film on time, it was released later. This film was scripted and directed by S.N.Chand, an enterprising businessman, who also acted in the film after having undergone a cosmetic nose surgery. He also supervised the music direction for the film. The film is an adaptation of a short story that was written by Manipur's renowned Poet, Dr. Kamal. Embellishing the film with the traditional cultural life of Manipuris, S.N Chand made a sensational artistic creation. According to R.K Bidur's account in his article, the film had a strong contest with '*Matamgi Manipur*' for the President's Award in the following year in 1973, which finally

ended with a tie. Late Prof. E. Nilakanta and Late Smt. M.K Binodini from Manipur were also on the list of the Jury at that time. S.N. Chand became the first director in Manipur to direct a Manipuri Feature. An avid lover of cinema, he contributed significantly to the development of Manipuri Cinema. He went on to make more films- '*Ngak-eko-nagsi*'(1974) and '*Khuttang Lamjel*'(1977) - and was later honoured for his contributions to cinema in 1985.

Manipuri Cinema started with films of the social and folktales-myth genres. It seemed that film makers need to learn film syntax more. Their approach to action, narration, make-up, lighting, direction etc., was fashioned after theatre plays and partly the popular 'Bombay Cinemas'. The decade of the 1970s witnessed the production of Manipuri films almost every year despite poor economic conditions. The 70smay be described as the 'Golden years' of Manipuri cinema where celluloid was still employed before it ceased to be produced from the late 1990s in the state. It was during this period that Manipuri films travelled within and outside the country and received various awards. According to the records of the MFDC, a total of 51 feature films and 24 short films (besides documentaries) were made in Manipur during 1972 to 2007, out of which thirteen received various titles and Awards owing much to the contributions of producers, directors and scriptwriters like G. Narayan Sharma, Aribam Syam Sharma, M.A Singh, M.K Binodini, M.A Singh, L. Banka Sharma, Oken Amakcham, Makhonmani Mongshaba,etc.

The films '*Saphabee*' (1975), '*Imagi Ningthem*'(1981) and '*Olangthagee Wangmadasoo*' (1990) won the coveted Rajat Kamal in the National Film Festivals of India while '*Imagi Ningthem*' was the only Indian Film to receive the Grand Prix Award at the Festival des 3 Continents in Nantes, placing North East India on the

world stage of cinema for the first time. The success of Manipuri cinema may be ascribed to the rich cultural heritage, tradition and the artistic skill of the Manipuris. A notable feature of Manipuri cinema is the foregrounding of traditional folklore and legends through the film medium. However, it can also be argued that their films, being made crudely, have failed to capture the true charm and beauty of their folk art. However, it is also observed that the other Manipuri films produced during the 1970s and 80s were mostly commercial films that were infused with the influence of song, dance and drama of the Bombay 'masala' cinema. Films so structured have only been patronized by a class of people who go to watch films solely for thrill, suspense and entertainment. At the same time, it is not fair to interpret the socials in the same way. Some make an attempt to present a new cinema that is seeking a new contemporary meaning of Manipuri society that is caught in the whirlpool of tradition, on the one hand, and pulled by the alluring force of modernity on the other. However, most of the films of this genre try to go safe with folk themes and family dramas rather than going to the core of other social issues in the State. Otherwise, G. Narayan Sharma's '*Sanamanbi Sanarei*' and the director duo S.N. Chand and Biswamitra's '*Kanaga Hinghouni*' are significant Manipuri films that narrate social issues like drug abuse and addiction. Based on the most destructive malaise of contemporary Manipuri society, '*Kanaga Hinghouni*' unfolds the devastating effects of drug abuse and the de-structuring of normal human relationships. It portrays a contrast of characters. 'Ibochouba'(Diya), a student residing in the house of the landlady Nayani, and his fiancé Leibaklei (Radhapyari) display traits of innocent forbearance cast against the treacherous machinations of Mamata (Seema) and her mother who forcibly insist that Ibochouba bear the brunt of Mamata's moral degradation. The film concludes with a

touching irony of fate with Mamata, in search of the child she had earlier abandoned, denied as she finds him dead of HIV infection. She ultimately decides to correct her past and serve humanity.

'Sanakeithel' (1983) by M.A Singh is a black and white film that portrays the crowded market place in Imphal called 'Sanakeithel' which translates as 'the golden market'. It narrates of the life and happenings of the famous market, strongly symbolizing the role and status of Manipuri womenfolk in dominating trade and commerce, and eventually identifying with the location and culture of the Meiteis. In the film however, the woman protagonist plays a contrary role in that she finds herself helpless after losing her husband, and is mistreated by other men at the marketplace, pushing her to deny her identity and abandoning her only son. With the busy marketplace in the background, the film broadly projects the search for lost ones in the crowd of the market- a lost lover, a lost husband, a lost mother, a lost friend. The most significant plot-line is the search of a lost mother by a little boy who was abandoned and was taken in to the market as a small time thief in order to survive. This film has been beautifully crafted in its cinematographic language. Although this film did not receive awards at the higher levels, one might say that this was a successful attempt at experimenting with a different theme from other contemporary films of that time. The director, in the following year, produced the first Manipuri colour film 'Langlen Thadoi' (1984) after which no other film has been recorded that was made by him. He was the first Manipuri filmmaker to have graduated from the Film and Television Institute of India (FTII), Pune bringing about the trend of a more serious cinema.

Aribam Syam Sharma, the leading film maker not only of Manipur but also of the North East India set a new trend in depicting social realism when he made '*Imagi Ningthem*', one of his finest films under the Banner of 'X-Cine Productions' produced by K.Ibohal Sharma in 1981. This award winning film also established K. Ibohal Sharma as a camera man of certain repute. He was awarded the best cameraman award for '*Paokhum Ama*' (1984). He also made archival films²⁸ for the Manipur State Kala Akademi. His film '*Sambal Wangma*'(1993) was selected for the Indian Panorama section of the 25th IFFI 1994 at Calcutta.

Makhonmani Mongsaba is another ardent film maker from Manipur who has contributed to the overall film movement in Manipur. His feature film '*Chatledo Eidi*' (2000) secured the 48th National Film Award for Best Manipuri feature film and won the Rajat Kamal. His other feature film '*Yenning Amadi Likla*' (2007) was also selected for the Indian Panorama 2007.

The First Trilogy: The making of meaningful Manipuri Cinema

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the meaning of the word "Trilogy" is given as a group of three related books, films/videos, dramas, etc having the same subject or character in it. From the writing of Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay(1950) comes the films by Satyajit Ray - "*Pathar Panchali*"(1955), "*Aparajito*"(1956), "*Apur Sangsar*"(1959) . These films helped in establishing him as one of the great film makers in the country and also recognized as one at the International level. In a similar manner, from M.K.Bonodini's writings come the films - "*Imagee*

²⁸ 'Maibi', 'Guru Atomba', 'Guru Amudon', 'Guru Amubi', 'Guru Ahum' and 'Aribapala'.

Ningthem”(1981), “*Ishanou*”(1990), “*Sanabi*”(1995) by Aribam Shyam Sharma who also established himself as a great film maker in the state and the North East region, securing for Manipuri Films an honored place in national and international cinemas. In Bibhuti Bhushan's trilogy, the lead character is ‘Apu’, the son of a poor Braham, Harihar, who lives in the village of Nischindipur. The characters in M.K.Binodini's trilogy do not revolve around just one person or character; rather her characters depict the various roles played by the Meitei womenfolk in society. We have seen this through the varied roles of women in her stories. Instances can be cited from the role portrayed by Memtombi (Bhubaneshori), Dhani(Yamini) and Akashini(Rashi) in the film “*Imagee Ningthem*” (My son/My precious);the role of Tampha(Kiranmala), Tampha's mother who was a vendor in the Wangjing (name of a place in Imphal) market, Angoubi (Manbi Devi), Priestess Dhani, Mother Guru(Ema Maibi) in the film “*Ishanou*”; the role played by Shakhi (R.K.Sunita) in the film “*Sanabi*”. In these three stories, the ethics of the Meitei womenfolk that have been passed down through time immemorial in Manipuri culture are clearly depicted. Some of the “additional values” just seem plain to the Western eye but are of high esteem to their own people. These values have been magnificently portrayed in the trilogy that directs the audience to recognize the importance of womenfolk in Manipur.

Mention can be made of the extraordinary imagination and ideas of Sahitya Academy awardee M.K.Binodini who manages to bring the life and social realities of the Manipuris to film reality. According to R.K Bidur, the events/plots in all the three films appear more realistic than actual ordinary life, which is why American and British critics considered “*Imagee Ningthem*”(My son, My precious), a story based on

real life story, and not based just on imagination. Kamala Chattopadhyay, during her young age who played the lead role in “*Amrapali*” and later on became the Chairman of the Sahitya Nathak Academy commented after watching “*Imagee Ningthem*” that “it won't come as a surprise to claim it as a real life picture”. Aribam Shyam Sharma selected the cast with meticulous care in order to do justice to the role of the characters that were required in the narration. His serious engagement with film language is clearly visible from his visual narration (image and sound) in the films. Through the films written by M.K Binodini and directed by Aribam Sharma, the ‘other India’, a varied Mongoloid identity of a rich art and cultural background was made known to the world. In that light, the Director of the French Film Festival Alain Jalladeau and his younger brother Philip Jalladeau, in appreciation of Manipuri Cinema chose to enter these films among the top listed section of the Festival for which a formal invitation was made to the Filmotsav, Calcutta for the same. The predictions of the Jalladeau brothers came true as the film “*Imagee Ningthem*” received the “Grand Prix” Award after strong competition with various African, Latin American and Asian films. Master Lokhendro who played the role of the little boy ‘Thoithoi’ in the same film was awarded the Best Child Award in India.

Derek Malcolm, a critic of ‘The Guardian’, London, while presenting a paper at the Filmotsav ’81 stated that the cinema although being a medium involved with technology, is first and foremost a social instrument- it involves people and it is about people. In that sense, it can be argued that as evident in most Manipuri films as that of Aribam Sharma’s, the most distinct characteristic of Manipuri cinema can be said to be the portrayal of the ‘real image’ of Manipuri society and its people (specific to the ‘Meitei society) and thereby bringing about a sense of identification in the psyche of

the audience, towards the greater aim of a changing or revolutionizing of society. On the other hand, Bidur has also expressed that when a film is made with a large budget and is cast on a 'larger than life' screen, it should be able to relate to real life, to the audience, and give meaning to the values and artistic expression of a particular people, society, phenomenon or subject. In spite of the technological drawbacks "*Imagee Ningthem*" has been greatly acclaimed all over the world for its great art and direction, for the story line as well as the opening scene. Western film critics have also expressed a similar view that – "a great storyline and the way it is directed or narrated is of more importance and value than just good technology". Following such an example, in spite of economic setbacks, the artistic expression in Manipuri films has managed to uphold for itself such a status of an Art House Cinema tradition that can be related with other cinemas across the globe by virtue of its cinematic language.

CHAPTER 2

ARIBAM SYAM SHARM AND THE CELLULOID DOCUMENTARY FILMS FROM MANIPUR (1972-2000)

An oeuvre of a veritable artist

Acclaimed as one of the most original filmmakers of India by international critics, Aribam Syam Sharma¹, as mentioned earlier, has represented the country in some of the most important national and international film festivals. His film 'Imagi Ningthem' is the first Indian film to be awarded the Golden Montolgerie, the Grand Prix of the Nantes film festival, France. He has won the National Award a record of fifteen times till date. Sharma's tireless work for the advancement of cinema makes him an involved film personality, who in various capacities has worked for the promotion of films in this region. In order to truly appreciate the works of such a renowned film maker, one would have to have an understanding of his work from the grass roots level- where he comes from, and his journey as an artist. His association with film making is as old as the existence of Manipuri cinema, but his affiliation with the performing arts began even as a young student in school. Expressed by Yves Thoraval, Sharma rightfully holds the first place of honour as the keystone of 'quality' film making in Manipur and the identity of a meaningful Manipuri cinema. Born in 1939, at Imphal, and graduating in philosophy and music from Santiniketan, Calcutta, he started off his career in films as a Music Director for 'Matamgi Manipur' in 1972. As expressed in his film biography 'Living Shadows', published by Gauhati Cine Club, Sharma's attraction and affiliation for the performing arts and cinema began

¹ He is the recipient of the Padmashri, 2007; V. Shantaram Lifetime Achievement Award 2008; Kamal Kumari Lifetime Achievement Award 2009.

with his love for music: “Music is my first love. It took to me to Santiniketan, it led me into theatre and eventually into cinema.” Aribam Syam Sharma’s artistic interests were probably inherited from his father Aribam Kalachand Sharma, a Sanskrit scholar who served His Highness Maharaj Bodhachandra of Manipur as a *Panji Shanglakpa*². He had a keen interest in ‘Shumang Lila’, the theatrical form of Manipuri, and acted in plays that were based on the episodes of the Mahabharata.

At a time when listening to gramophone records was a rare luxury in Manipur, Aribam Sharma’s taste for music started with listening to Bengali and Hindi film music along with devotional songs/kirtanas in Bengali. There were also songs in Manipuri - the traditional folk songs, and the ‘new form’ of songs which were mainly tunes lifted from popular Hindi and Bengali songs with Manipuri lyrics. With a gradual and deeper appreciation for music, his desire to create and express a more indigenous, authentic music that could convey and sympathise with the feelings of the local people instead of a borrowed sentiment from Hindi and Bengali songs was instilled. Later, the organization under whose umbrella he brought forth a new kind of music known in Manipuri as ‘Matamgi Eshei’ (songs of the times) was the quintessential music organization called ‘Roop Raag’ (RR), the oldest musical association in the state, which was a collaboration of artists from Amateur Artistes Association (AAA)³, Rupmahal Theatre, Aryan Theatre, together with poets, lyricists and writers like M.K Binodini, Shri N. Pahari, Shri Jayantakumar Sharma, Sanasam Ibophsak, G. Rodindro Sharma and Oja Haricharan among others. Even though RR has been involved with theatre and dance, it remains synonymous with the Manipuri

² The head of the department of the royal astrologers.

³ The first organization for Artistes in Manipur which was formed by Aribam Sharma, Pahari, Phulendra, Samarendra, Rabindra and Aken while they were students in D.M college, Imphal. This was a collective effort to create new music and drama in the state.

modern song. In the words of Aribam Sharma, “My films have been described as lyrical and poetic. I believe that it is an extension of the music personality in me.”⁴

Aribam Syam Sharma, after graduating in Philosophy from Santiniketan, came to teach as a lecturer in D.M College. It was during this stage that he became most active with music and theatre besides teaching. The Manipur Dramatic Union, the Aryan theatre, Society theatre and Rupmahal theatre were very active during this period. Through the insistence of Taibungo Biramangol of Aryan theatre, Aribam became a part of theatre activities and the theatre movement. The Aryan theatre’s tradition of leniency towards experimentation provided Aribam with an opportunity to refine his knowledge of acting and theatre direction working under the theatre director and writer M.Biramangol. Under his directorship, Aribam acted in lead roles in plays like ‘*Pidonu*’, ‘*Pamheiba Chingu khongnanghaba*’. Etc. Later, he started directing the plays that were written by Arambam Somerondro- ‘*Dasha*’, ‘*Karbar*’, ‘*Mirang*’ and ‘*Judge Sakhibi Imung*’. Aribam Syam Sharma’s break into experimental theatre came through Sri Biren’s trilogy ‘*Khonchat*’, ‘*Ani*’ and ‘*Hallakpa*’. The traditional design of the stage had to be thrown out in order to meet with the requirement of the story. This was a new concept in Manipuri theatre then as Biren’s trilogy was initially considered absurd. This trilogy later became termed as ‘a poetic vision’. However, according to critic Prof. E. Nilakanta Singh, the play that marked the arrival of a different kind of Manipuri theatre that was directed by Sharma was M.K Binodini’s ‘*Ashangba Nogjabi*’ which portrayed the life of an artist as a seeker, an explorer and an aspirer of the infinite. Sharma later directed another play written by M.K. Binodini called ‘*Ngeihak Lambida*’. Even Shakespeare’s ‘*Macbeth*’, translated into Manipuri

⁴ ‘Living Shadows’ published by Guwahati Cine Club, 2006, p34.

by Kh. Phulendro, was directed by Sharma while he was still associated with the Aryan Theatre group.

Aribam Syam Sharma as a Filmmaker

While Aribam became active as a theatre director and actor and with a strong background in music, he became recognized as an influential budding artist in Manipur. He was approached by Karam Monomohan, as one of the creative minds in shaping and giving life to the Manipuri romantic novel '*Madhabi*' on the big screen. At this point, it can be noted that Karam Monomohan, an enterprising businessman from Manipur, had earlier attempted to make the first Manipuri feature ('*Mainu Pemcha*') with Director Debkumar Bose. This project met with unforeseen tragedies and was left incomplete. Not getting disheartened, a second attempt was made with the same team from Calcutta that this time included the involvement of various artists including Aribam Syam Sharma from Manipur. Upon discussing, '*Madhabi*', whose story was set in pre-war Manipur became unfeasible as it entailed huge expenses on the construction of sets, costumes, actors, etc. At this point, Manipur had not yet experienced the art of professional film making and the fear for another '*Mainu Pemcha*' kept the producer and director in check, and with the desire to find a more feasible script. Upon the advice of Debkumar Bose and the suggestion of Aribam Sharma, a new play was taken up as the project for the feature film. Aribam Somorendro's '*Tirtha Jatra*', later titled as '*Matangi Manipur*' was translated into Bengali for the director and the Calcutta film crew. Aribam Syam Sharma, from his earlier affiliations in Santiniketan, provided the team, the fluency required in the

Bengali language. He became the main translator of the script and virtually made communication possible between the writer and the director. This was a unique production of a 'regional cinema' that involved workmanship and creative ideas shared from across borders- surpassing the boundary of language or culture. But it cannot also be denied that actors and technicians from the very beginning of the construction of sets in Calcutta at the 'Calcutta Movietone' studios, Tollygunge, to the completion of the film at the editing room for the final mixing of sound and audio came from Calcutta. The task of the music direction was given to Aribam. Halfway through the shooting of this film in Calcutta, the actor playing a prominent role of the father in the film took ill which nearly sent the film back to Manipur undone. It would have been a repeat of the haunting history of *Mainu Pemcha*. Aribam Syam Sharma took up the role and acted in the film impromptu. The outbreak of the Civil war in Bangladesh in 1971 that resulted in tight security in Calcutta brought in new issues of problems and challenges for the completion of the film on time. Most actors who had to resume their jobs in Manipur began to back out from the project. The script had to be re edited several times and for which Aribam Sharma's assistance was greatly sought after. In a way, he was the mastermind and the saving grace for the reality of the first Manipuri feature film to be witnessed in the state, nation and the world. This project that immediately bagged the National Award provided for him his first training ground in the film making art and a new found courage and drive to make more Manipuri films.

Just two years after the release of '*Matamgi Manipur*', collaborating with the producer G.Narayan Sharma, Sharma directed his first Manipuri feature '*Lamja parsuram*' (1974) that became a record breaking box office hit in the state, surpassing

the running time of the Hindi film ‘*Sholay*’(1975) which was otherwise creating a phenomenal wave in the country. In this way, as a Director, music director, actor, coordinator, conceptualist and creative artist, Sharma’s personality as a filmmaker was born. Till date he has directed nine Manipuri feature films, and twenty six non feature films. His films, though rooted in the socio-cultural milieu of Manipur, have found favour globally due to the universal appeal of the subjects in his films. His tireless work for the advancement of cinema in the North East makes him an involved film personality, who in his various capacities has worked for the promotion of the film scenario in Manipur. A Retrospective of his Non-feature films was organized by the Films Division at the Mumbai International Film Festival, 2000. A tribute to Syam Sharma’s cinematic journey “Miles To Go” was also organized by the Directorate of Film Festivals in the IFFI, Goa in 2007. The Government of India conferred a ‘Padmashri’ on him in 2006 and he was also awarded the ‘Dr. V. Shantaram Life Time Achievement Award’ in 2008.

On his working relationship with M.K Binodini

Before we can analyze the films of Aribam Syam Sharma that have been acclaimed worldwide, one would have to delve into the contributions of the writer M.K Binodini who has written and scripted most of his films that have bagged several awards and much appreciation. Much of the original and authentic flair of his films is the result of the deep and personal cultural roots that the writer possessed.

Maharaja Kumari Binodini Devi, born 1922 is a well known litterateur having contributed some of the best literary works in Manipuri. A recipient of the

Padmashree, M.K. Binodini is the youngest daughter of Maharaja Sir Churachand Singh of Manipur and Maharani Dhanamanjuri Devi. Educated at Shillong and at Santineketan, she has to her credit several popular literary pieces including short stories, radio plays, lyrics, ballet scripts and film scripts. Her collection of short stories, titled '*Nunggairakta Chandramukhi*' bagged her the Jamini Sunder Guha Gold Medal. Her historical novel '*Boro Saheb Ongbi Sanatombi*' also fetched the Sahitya Akademi Award. She has also translated several of Rabindranath Tagore's songs into Manipuri.

She has, in close working relationship with director Aribam Syam Sharma, written the film scripts for six Manipuri feature films- '*Olangthagee Wangmadasoo*', '*Imagi Ningthem*', '*Paokhum Ama*', '*Ishanou*', '*Mayophigee Macha*' and '*Sanabi*'. Excepting '*Paokhum Ama*', all the films received National Awards. Besides feature films, she also wrote film scripts for documentary films that include the National Award winning film '*Orchids Of Manipur*', the internationally acclaimed film '*Sangai- Dancing Deer Of Manipur*', and '*Laa*'.

Having received her education in Bengal, her associations with Bengali art and literature have come to influence her writings, especially from the works of Saratchandra, Bankim Chandra, Tagore and Madhusudan Dutta. Most of her writings have emphasized female roles and characters. However, a few of her works like '*Sagol Sanabi*' and '*Nunggairakta Chandramukhi*' have focused on male characters as well, but in the roles of a gambler or a ruffian, etc. It can be observed that the role of the woman, even under oppression and in situations of subjection, is greatly patronized and glorified in her writings that reflect upon the significant role that Manipuri women have in 'Meitei' society. In her words "It is a natural trait with me to

write in the first person using 'I'. When I write in this style, I tend to portray myself as woman first"⁵. This fact may be the reason why most films made by Syam Sharma seem women-centric. The possibility of having other popular themes in Sharma's films could have cropped up but for the fact that the writer herself as a woman has come to strongly influence and dominate the visual language of his films. For instance, it is a Manipuri custom for younger women to not gaze directly upon their elders. To depict such a social value, Syam has to set up his camera angles in such a way that it does not betray this norm. His protagonists, being female, have made his films achieve a certain recurring style and language that if one were not familiar with their customs; one would fail to notice how tactfully his films have been crafted.

HIS ACCLAIMED ART FILM

Apart from his mainstream films, good but commercially oriented, which won critical acclaim and mass appeal, his three art films which have merited international acclaim are hardly watched in Manipur, surprisingly. According to E. Nilakanta Singh, a deafening critical silence has enveloped this filmmaker and we have to depend mostly on the perspective of eminent Indian and Western film critics. An alternate assessment of the works of Aribam Syam Sharma becomes all the more necessary since his films have regional and ethnic dimensions. The local sensibility in response to his art can be asserted and be made known to the critics outside. Every art form can support various levels of interpretation. Satyajit Ray, for example, has been reassessed from the Indian point of view relating to such questions as to how much of an Indian

⁵ Excerpt taken from the article 'Cultural Root is the strength to my Literature: Interview with Maharajah Kumari Binodini Devi' published in the souvenir of '25 years of Manipuri Cinema' 1997, p41.

he was or what the exact merit of his last trilogy was, etc. Aribam Syam Sharma has managed to tread upon the fine balance between aesthetic considerations and commercial compulsions in his three early films- 'Lamja Parsuram' (1974), 'Saphabee' (1976) and 'Olangthagee Wangmadasoo' (1979).

'Imagi Ningthem' (1981)

Dhani is a well educated woman living by her principles of right and wrong. That is one reason why she even refuses to go to the city for a job. Instead Dhani becomes a school teacher in a far off village. In the opening frame of the black and white film, Dhani is seen on a rickshaw starting her journey towards the village. It is a 5 minute 'uncut shot' in which Dhani's thoughts are randomly audible to the audience. Audiences who watch it with immense interest have seen the uniqueness of the opening scene, the brilliance of the narration of the story in the direction of the film. The grandfather (Mangi) comes to pick up his grandson at the school where Dhani teaches. At this sight Dhani becomes curious about the kid's parents. She learns the whole story when she enquires about it to one of her colleagues, Gandhar. The child turns out to be none other than her brother-in-law, Dinachandra's (Indrakumar) illegitimate son. On hearing this story Dhani narrates the story to her sister Akashini. After much thought Akashini accepts the little child like her own son. When telecast in New directions, New films, New York and International Film Festival (Denver), this film, as remarked by R.K Bidur found a new audience among the American women who felt strongly attracted to this "different form" of womanhood and motherhood especially on the issue of illegitimacy. They even expressed their interest

that the film be telecast as a ‘Social lesson’ in their Universities, Schools and Colleges.

‘Imagi Ningthem’ can be seen as an attempt at experimentation by the director Aribam Syam Sharma. Blown up from 16mm, this film was shown at Calcutta in the Indian panorama. Despite the poor technical quality and ‘untutored way’ of film making that is usually associated with all his art films, this film managed to surprise and dazzle the audience with its vivid and fluid ‘real life’ narration. Thematically it was the strange love of a stepmother for an illegitimate child in a neo-realist framework of reference, which struck a deep chord with film critics all over the world. This film won the Nantes Grand Prix award in 1982 and proved to be a splendid achievement from India’s North East. According to E.N. Singh, this film portrayed a certain sense of innocence and a certain kind of purity, probably an indication of things to come from such a filmmaker. Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay of the Sangeet Natak Akademi, on seeing this film said “it was like watching real life. It had no artificial settings or forced action. It was a life picture that depicted the lives of even the actors in their everyday life”⁶.

‘Ishanou’ (1990) (The Chosen One)

His second art film *‘Ishanuo’* entered the Indian Panorama and was an official entry at the Cannes Film Festival in 1991. In this film Syam Sharma takes the audience into the strange world of the Maibis (A Meitei Priestess) during the Lai Haraoba Festival

⁶ Excerpt taken from a letter addressed to the director Aribam Syam Sharma from the above mentioned of the Sangeet Natak Akedemi, New Delhi, published in the film biography ‘Living Shadows’ by Guwahati Cine Club 2006,p.135.

of Manipur where the material and the occult worlds coexist. Tampha, a modern lady of a middle class family is suddenly chosen for this profession and gradually becomes separated from her husband and daughter against her will. Although regarded honorable in Meitei society to be chosen as a 'Maibi' Priestess, a 'maibi' does not share or experience the same world as the ordinary human being. She is called out and chosen specially for the role of a priestess and usually shelters with other 'maibi' sisters, her only family. Tampha finds herself alone and torn away from a world she had once known and had. This film is contextualized in the rich ceremonious occasion of the Lai Haraoba and its colorful ritual songs and dances. Samik Banerjee, the eminent film critic from Calcutta characterized it as a masterpiece from Manipur adding that this film "captures the complexity in a cinematic language that looks deceptively simple and charming but raises disturbing questions nevertheless"⁷. With this film, Syam Sharma has taken up a subject that is somewhat exotic even for the Indian audience. At the same time, the emotional situations presented through the role of Tampha are universal. David Overby of "Contemporary World Cinema" comments that "the film is haunting, and the dance rites and songs of the Maibis are hypnotic and relate perfectly to the story". Apart from the various press interviews in India and abroad, special reviews have been devoted to this film and Sharma like "*Ishanou*' and Indian Cinema"⁸ and an interview done by Altaf Mazid and D.P. Sinha⁹. In their opinion, "the understated lyrical style perfectly complementing contents steeped in the cultural traditions of his native land has won him many laurels both inside and outside it". Aribam Shyam Sharma through this film tries to maintain a delicate

⁷ Taken from the article written by E. Nilakanta Singh 'The world of Aribam Syam Sharma' published in the film biography 'Living Shadows' by Guwahati Cine Club, 2006, p132.

⁸ Babu Subramaniam: Call of the faraway Hills: Deep Focus Vol III No. 4 1991.

⁹ Walking the tight rope: Deep Focus Vol-IV NO.2 1992.

balance between modernity and tradition. He does not take sides by showing the Maibi phenomenon just as it is and leaves the conclusion of such a phenomenon and its rhetoric to the audience. John Warrington, a BBC correspondent of *The Guardian*, aptly described this film as ‘a poem on celluloid’.

Sanabi (1995) (The Grey Mare)

His latest art film, ‘*Sanabi*’ which entered the Indian Panorama section earning critical acclaim from the Indian press is based on a short story written by M.K. Binodini who also wrote for his earlier art films. This film deals with a beautiful love story- the impossible love between a wayward youth and a divorcee from a princely family. Another love also enters in the form of a grey mare owned like a daughter by the lady’s father, standing as a symbol of sanctity and inapproachability. The story ends with the youth stealing the mare and returning it to the lady. Both of them happened to be friends since childhood (reminding one of the relations between Srikanta and Rajlaxmi in Saratchandra’s novel *Srikanta*). Syam Sharma explores the cinematic possibility of the original story in his own way by introducing much of the cultural heritage in the form of songs and dances which were absent in the original. To a perceptive critic like Prayag Sukla of *Navbharat Times* (Jan.9, 1996), the beautiful film appears to grow out of the cultural soil of Manipur in all its splendour where love becomes devotion. Quite the contrary, in a press briefing in Imphal, Syam Sharma rejected this film as a story merely dealing with the preservation of the cultural heritage of Manipur and more particularly the breeding of Manipuri ponies which is a vanishing species.

Sanabi is the name of the grey pony. A teacher of Polo has reared it with great affection. Among the Meitei community a grey pony is shrouded in numerous religious beliefs which also play into the psyche of the guru. With the arrival of an errant character, Mangi, the peace of the remote village gets shattered. He ends up falling in love with the teacher's daughter, Shakhi, who had already been married. He steals the pony to force her to marry him. The story line of the film appears simple but the contents have been described complex by few critics. If observed closely, one cannot segregate the cultural practices of the Meiteis from their religious convictions. *Sanabi* becomes a symbol of Manipuri culture. According to E.N. Singh, although the beautiful classical music and dances that were excellently captured in the film drew the attention of the non-Manipuri audience, Syam Sharma has missed the deeper grasp of the emotion of love to be mentioned about this film, pandering to superficial regionalism. Singh argues that in the latest art film by Syam Sharma, the director has been affected by the downward pull of cultural heritage and the populist pressure of regionalism at the cost of artistic sensibilities. He states that "the beautiful love story written by M.K. Binodini has been distorted almost terribly at the altar of so-called patriotism"¹⁰.

HIS DOCUMENTARY FILMS

Short and documentary films have a significant place in Manipur having recorded Manipur's social progress and archived valuable information about contemporary and current events on the one hand, and on the other, having documented important

¹⁰ Taken from the article written by E. Nilakanta Singh 'The world of Aribam Syam Sharma' published in the film biographhy 'Living Shadows' by Guwahati Cine Club, 2006, p133.

aspects of the cultural life, tradition and heritage of the Meiteis in the Imphal valley and the tribal communities in the hills of Manipur. Progressing from black and white to colour, with formats in 16mm and 35mm, the non-feature films have edged in to win recognition at the national and international levels for their contribution in projecting and popularizing the different facets of Manipuri life and the hitherto unknown facts of Manipur's rich heritage. As per the records, the first Manipuri documentary film to be ever screened publicly was '*Maipak: Son of Manipur*' on November 9, 1971. The film directed by Debkumar Bose from Calcutta is of ten minutes duration in both Manipuri and English languages. This film took up as its subject the achievement of Nongthombam Maipak Singh who clinched the prestigious title of Mr. India in 1970. In the following year the same director made three documentaries which were recordings of Government sponsored state functions in connection with particular events. The trend of documentary filmmaking gradually began with keen interest by other directors like M.A. Singh, Aribam Syam Sharma, Sanakhya Ibotombi, etc. During this time, various documentary films on Manipur were made by directors like Ashish Mukherjee who made a seventeen minutes English documentary on '*Guru Amubi Singh*' in 1976. Guru Amubi Singh was the grand patriarch of Manipuri Dance. The film demonstrates the Guru's finely honed style of dancing based on the spontaneous rhythm of nature. Another director, Benoy Roy, had made a documentary '*Manipur*' in 1972 that presents the fascinating life of the people of Manipur both in the valley as well as the hill areas covering their colourful festivals and dances in the film. As mythology goes, god Nongpokingthou and goddess Panthoibi created Manipur in their cosmic dance for the happiness of the ancient tribes. Such a representation has been captured in Jagat Murari's documentary

‘Jewel of Manipur’ in 1982 which captures a panoramic view of the life, culture and various developments that have taken place in this state.

Probably drawing inspiration from such films to capture and preserve the life of Manipur in celluloid, Aribam Syam Sharma was the first (and probably the only till date) Manipuri filmmaker who went on to ardently make several documentary films. Till date he has made twenty six documentary films which started in 1977 with the making of ‘*Towards A Better Life*’ and the ‘*20 point economic programme*’ sponsored by the Department of Information And Public Relations, Government of Manipur. Throughout his endeavor with documentary films, he has worked in close coordination with various Government organizations that have funded almost all of his documentary films. Aribam Syam Sharma strikes a record by winning National Awards in consecutive years for most of the documentary films he made.

His first Award winning documentary film was made in 1980. *Sanaleibak Manipur*¹¹, narrated in the Meiteilon language of Manipuri has as its subject the general aspects of the state, with reports on the governmental development programmes. It won the State Award for the Best Documentary film in non-feature category at the first Manipuri State Film Festival in 1984. In 1986, Films Division of India sponsored Aribam Syam Sharma’s ‘*Tales of Courage*’ which is a film about Manipur’s significant role in India’s freedom struggle. This film narrates the history of Manipur’s contribution to the struggle right from 1857 when it was ruled by Maharaja Kirti Singh. As noted by film journalist Pradip Biswas¹², what we notice in

¹¹ This film is produced by the Directorate of Information and Public Relations, Government of Manipur. This department also produced two other short documentary films in this same year that were directed by M.A Singh- ‘Manipur News ‘79’ and ‘Manipur News ‘80-81’. The films were recordings of current events in the particular year in Manipur.

¹² Screen 13-4-92.

the film is Aribam's intuitive faith and conviction about the 'spirit' of Manipuris¹³ who sacrificed their lives for the freedom of India from the British Raj. By using collage and sometimes exploiting the location visuals, Aribam has interpreted history to depict the role played by this tiny state in the Freedom movement. The film also emphasizes the contributions of Manipuri women in resisting British rule in Manipur. The essence and the importance of the *Nupilal* (Women's War) are highlighted in this film.

His next documentary film, '**Sanagai- Dancing Deer of Manipur**' (1988) was produced for the Sangeet Natak Akademi, New Delhi, which is based on the ballet '*Keibul Lamjao*' written by M.K. Binodini and performed by the ballet unit of the Jawaharlal Nehru Manipur Dance Academy, Imphal. With a duration of 46 minutes in 16mm colour, this film was shot at the Kalinga Studio in Orissa, and is without any commentary but is subtitled in English. The film bagged five Merit Awards in the 12th Annual International Wildlife Film Festival at Missoula, Montana, U.S.A. in 1989. These awards were given for the presentation of the inter-relationships between wildlife and humans, artistic excellence in choreography, a novel interpretation of the spirit of animals with delicate depiction of wildlife. This film was declared the 'Outstanding film of the year' by the British Film Institute in London in 1989.

Aribam Syam Sharma directed three documentaries during this same year. '*Keibul Lamjao National Park*' was produced for the forest department in Manipur. The film is based on the salient features of the internationally acclaimed floating park

¹³ Manipuri prince Narendrajit Singh led the revolutionaries of the 34th Native infantry against the British. He was captured and transported to the Andamans. Since then, Manipur had produced great freedom fighters, like Rani Gaidinliu, who dedicated their lives for the cause of India's freedom. Such a history may be found to re-live in the documentary films from Manipur.

in the Bishenpur District of Manipur. A special focus has been laid on the Sangai, the rare and endangered brow-antlered deer. It won the State Award for the best documentary film in Manipur state festival 1994. The third film '*Koro Kosii*'¹⁴ produced by the MFDC highlights the essence of the traditional village-gate erecting ceremony of the Mao Tribe in Northern Manipur. The associated ritual of pulling and erecting the village-gate is a ceremony performed once in several years in this village, usually accompanied by their folk songs with pomp and gaiety.

The film '*The Deer on the Lake*' (1889) was produced for the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH), New Delhi. It takes up the theme of the endangered brow-antlered deer Sangai. The film goes to lengths to highlight the changing environment in Keibul Lamjao¹⁵, the habitat of the Sangai, and the consequent threat to its survival. It received the Award for Best Environment/Conservation/Preservation Film in 1990.

1990 also marked the entry of his documentary films to bag an Award at the National levels. The film '*Indigenous Games of Manipur*' was awarded for Best Exploration/Adventure Film at the 38th National Film festival in 1991. This film highlights the several indigenous games played in Manipur such as the Cheibi, Mukna, Yubi Lakpa, Mukna Kangjei, Hiyang, Kang and Sagol Kangjei. His documentary film '*Meitei Pung*' (1991) was sponsored by Doordarshan Kendra Guwahati. Meitei pung, a musical instrument¹⁶, is an indispensable cultural heritage in

¹⁴ Of the recognitions achieved by this film, mention may be made of its participation in the Indian Panorama section of the IFFI Calcutta in 1989 and also in the Indian Film Week held at Hungary in 1989 and in the Bombay International Film Festival. 1989.

¹⁵ By this time, he had already made a documentary on this wildlife park called '*Keibul Lamjao*' where he briefly discussed the Sangai deer. Both these documentaries have a similar line of theme.

¹⁶ This musical instrument is a barrel shaped drum, made only from a particular wood known as the 'Wang'. According to the Meitei Puya, the genesis of the pung goes back to cosmological creation. The

the life of a Meitei. This film portrays how such an instrument makes possible the very essence of their festivals like Lai Haraoba, and even their Nat Sankirtan or Ras Lila. This film delves into the mysticism and the aestheticism of the indigenous percussion music of the Meiteis in Manipur. It won the special Jury National Award in 1992 and was earlier shown at the Indian Panorama section of the IFFI in 1991.

Produced in the following year, his film '*Lai Haraoba*'(1992)¹⁷ goes to lengths to dwell upon the different aspects of the festival and its performances, particularly the associated rituals and dances of the 'Maibi' womenfolk, a unique phenomenon of their culture. While his documentary films have on the one hand focused on the culture and heritage of Manipur , his documentary '*Orchids of Manipur*' in 1994 demonstrates another dimension of his work in this form as it focuses on Manipur in terms of its landscape and abundant natural beauty and wildlife. It draws as its theme a picture of the beautiful orchid flowers in their assorted varieties and environment, out of which the rare purple orchid has been symbolized as their state flower. The connected lores in folk tales and legends about these orchids are also emphasized in this film. It was awarded the Best Environment/ Conservation/ Preservation Film Award in 1995¹⁸.

Yet another of his Award winning documentary films exhibits the multifaceted variety of their dances performed at the Lai Haraoba Festival. '*Yelhou Jagoi*'¹⁹

pung as we know it today has gone through a series of changes. Today it is a fusion of 'Khol' and 'Langte' developed from the time of the king Charaiongba and perfected during the reign of king Bhagyachandra.

¹⁷ Meaning 'festivities of the gods', this film was produced for the Indira Gandhi National centre for the Arts, new Delhi (IGNCA).

¹⁸ It was screened at the Indian Panorama section of the IFFI in 1994, participated in the International Wildlife Film Festival at Morocco. This film has also been approved by the External Affairs Ministry, Government of India for purchase by foreign exhibitors.

¹⁹ This film had the rare honour to open the film festival of the Indian Panorama section of the International Film festival of india in January 1996 at the Siri Fort Auditorium New Delhi.

(Dances of Lai Harouba) made in 1995, is based on the creation myth narrated and enacted in the Lai Haraoba. The thirty minute long film in 35mm colour is not accompanied with a commentary, which by itself is a distinctive characteristic of the film. It bagged the national Award for Best Anthropological/ Ethnographical Film in 1996. Such a film, to an audience that may be unfamiliar with the small state, would allow for a wider perception of rich Manipuri culture.

Aribam's genuine concern for Manipur's ecological balance is also beautifully manifested in '*Loktak-dying lake of Manipur*' (1998). This film captures the famed Loktak lake, a natural sanctuary of a vast sprawling area with a canopy of the blue sky over its head, amidst the pollution that is affecting the flora and fauna of the lake. In this attempt, we can clearly see the serious intentions the director has in directing urgent attention to the responsibilities of the authorities of the Government, and not only with the 'artistic attributes' within their culture.

'*The Marams*'²⁰ (1999) won him a proud berth at the Indian Panorama section of IFFI and was rated highly by the critics. Through this film he begins to look at the varied people and their practices from various tribes that reside in the hills of Manipur. This film is about the skill of erecting Megaliths by the Maram tribals in Manipur said to be one of the wonders of the world. The Monoliths are not buried in the ground in any way; surprisingly they are made to stand on the ground without any support. It is a unique practice that may be slowly dying away, even in the rich diasporas of ethnic communities in Manipur. His other documentary *Thangta*

²⁰ This film was made for the Directorate of Tribals and backward Classes, Govt. of Manipur. It participated in the Mumbai International Film festival 2000, and the Kathmandu International Mountain Film Festival the same year.

(1999)²¹ also won him the National Award for Best Arts/Cultural Film for its passionate cinematic expression of the traditional martial arts of Manipur.

The Monpas of Arunachal Pradesh (2001) is a film of 25 minutes in English that won the National Award as the Anthropological film that portrays the Monpa tribe inhabiting Arunachal Pradesh. Through this film one can observe a distinctive lifestyle that they maintain that is readily identifiable. The film reveals how they observe rituals, customs and traditions that are unique, the most interesting being the system of marriage wherein the girl elopes with the chosen man and informs her mother through signs that are very distinctive in manner. This film is well researched in exploring this tribe in its true colour and historical relevance. The style of its exploring the genesis and essence of these practices is unique and reveals the mystical liturgies of their tribe, of significant historical and anthropological content, largely unknown to the historians and the cultured world on the whole. The award is considered to be a major breakthrough in the field of cultural victory for all the North East States said to be in the backwaters for many years. It also won the Best Cinematography Award.

His lesser known documentary films²² are *'The Golden hands'*(2002)²³, *'Rani-the living legend'* (2003), *'MK Binodini'*(2003), *'Nilamani: Master Potter of Manipur'* (2003), *'Ashangba Nongjabi'*(2004), *'Guru Thambalngoubi Devi'* (2006) *'Rajarchi Bhagyachandra of Manipur'*(2007) and *'Mr.Manipur'* (2008). They are all films based on the life and works of several distinguished names in the political, cultural and artistic history of Manipur. The story of Rani Gaidinliu, a woman freedom fighter

²¹ This film was made for the IGNCA, New delhi.

²² All these films mentioned were made for PPC,NE and DDK Imphal.

²³ Made for the PSBT, New Delhi

from Manipur, and her vital role in the freedom movement in India is captured in 'Rani-the living legend', while 'Rajarshi Bhayachandra of Manipur' is on the life of Bhagyachandra as a Meitei warrior, king, a blessed Vaishnav and a religious reformer in the former princely state.

HIS SHORT FILMS

His acclaimed short film '*Paokhum Ama*' (1984) takes up the theme on the problems of unemployment and frustration of the youth in Manipur in failing to secure monetary and social security. On the other hand, it dwells on the inter-relationship of two major communities in Manipur. The film dwells on the unsaid romance of a Meitei youth who reaches a village in Ukhrul to seek his fortune and a young *Tangkhul* of that village. The finale arrives when the girl gets married to one of her own community in another village and the young man returns to the village from a visit to his home in the city, just in time to bid her a silent farewell. The film while centering on the contemporary subject of unemployment of educated youth, also attempts in its flow to establish a projection of a certain relationship of the hills and the plains, away from the milieu of human polity and social stigmas. While some may arrive at the opinion of an amiable friendly relationship, Chidananda Dasgupta has mentioned that in this short film "there is an extra dimension here, for there is a strain of traditional hostility between the tribals of the hills and the Vaishnavite Meiteis of the plains, which normally preludes such relationships."²⁴ Technically far superior to

²⁴ Taken from an article of the Express magazine, September 18, 1983, published in the film biography 'Living Shadows', by Guwahati Cine Club, 2006, p 102.

his acclaimed film 'Imagi Ningthem', this film shares with its predecessor a gentle charm and true feeling for people and relationships.

In 1998 his other short film '*Shingnaba*' explores the various superstitious beliefs of the people in Manipur, while his latest known short film, '*Paari*' in 2000 is a short children's film in the form of a choreographed ballet play. It was screened at the 12th International Children's Festival in India, Hyderabad, 2001.

In conclusion, one can understand the conscious choice that Aribam Syam Sharma has made in staying away from making popular commercial cinema or using commercial shallow themes in all his films that he has been actively and consistently involved with since 1972. He has commented saying "The genius of the Manipuri people is not suited for the commercial variety. I am true to my art and my cinema is a natural extension of the unique culture, history and the ancient civilization of Manipur"²⁵. He has expressed that his belief as a filmmaker is to return to the roots of the culture and make them into films which stand out as works of art. He says:

"Regionalism in Arts need not have the negative connotations it has in other areas of human affairs. When the name of Regionalism in cinema is taken in our country, it is stamped as a parochial or an attitude of inferiority complex. But for me regionalism is the soul of Indian Cinema."²⁶

Today, his films have given him an auteur status of a filmmaker whose love for the art of cinema and his culture make his films appear as audio-visual documents of the multifaceted life of the rich culture of the *Meiteis* in particular, and the various tribes in the North Eastern region of India.

²⁵ 'Syam Sharma: Search for roots' interviewed by Pradip Phanjoubam, published in the souvenir '25 years of Manipuri Cinema' by Manipur Film Development Corporation, 1997, p.51.

²⁶ Excerpt taken from the article 'Regional Films of North East India: Possibilities and challenges' by Aribam Syam Sharma, published in 'Living Shadows', by Guwahati Cine Club, 2006, p.81.

THE OTHER DOCUMENTARY FILMS IN MANIPUR: FINIDNG A NEW FILM GENRE IN MANIPUR

A small group of young directors emerged in the 1990s. By this time, the Manipur Film Development Cooperation (MFDC) was already providing grants for feature and documentary films to be produced in Manipur. A mere Rupees 50,000 grant for a feature film seemed inadequate for the more serious filmmakers to pursue feature filmmaking and they opted for trying their hands at documentary films. As dictated by the video format, the rise of aspiring television filmmakers in particular, gradually emerged in Manipur. On the one hand, celluloid films were transferred on to video tapes for broadcast purposes and on the other, video films were made in the VHS format. Films made for television broadcast purposes were popularly sought after as a means of income. At this stage, as Kh. Kuleswar remarks, a fine broadcast quality of video films was not being met with by these documentary tapes, the major reason, again, being the lack of knowledge or training in the use of high broadcast quality professional cameras and editing set-ups in the state. The ignorance of the difference in technology involved in the making of celluloid and the television films with regard to the shooting method and technique, light, sound and editing, etc. affected the overall quality of their video films that was very poor. Beginning almost with crude 'actuality'-like films, the visual texture of their initial documentary films could be described as 'raw' treatment of location, people, lighting, acting and the narration of a subject or theme, indicative of a certain immaturity and lack of depth in the content of these lesser known documentary films. A vacuum of 'quality' films became the outcome which proved an appropriate opportunity for more serious producers and directors to serious re-think their involvement in the film making practice in Manipur.

Government Organisations: A catalyst for the more meaningful documentary films in Manipur

By the mid 1990s, documentary films began to overtake the few feature films from Manipur that had made an impact at different national film screening arenas with a spark of brilliance in terms of their content and authentic appeal of the subject for the audience. This was largely due to the involvement of sponsoring Government bodies for the production of films that subscribed to specific themes or subjects of social or cultural relevance, and eventually this led to the survival of meaningful film making practice in Manipur. In 1990, the film festival for non-feature films in the country was held at the Mumbai International Film Festival which opened up a grand platform for the participation of Manipuri documentary films at the National levels. Films Division, the first distributing organization of short films and documentaries in the country, along with Doordarshan Kendra (Imphal and Guwahati), Indira Gandhi National Center for the Arts (IGNCA), National Films Development Corporation (NFDC) and the Manipur Films Development Corporation (MFDC) became the major Government bodies sponsoring the documentary and short films of directors like Makhonmani Mongshaba, Oken Amakcham, L. Samarendra Singh, Romi Meitei, Ronel Haobam etc. Even acclaimed and renowned directors, for instance, Aribam Syam Sharma, as we have discussed earlier, by this time had already begun to work ardently with the documentary genre in collaboration with the Government Film agencies. He may be one of the rare filmmakers witnessed in the state and even the country who has been consistent in his artistic style and cinematic language in all his films- feature, shorts and documentaries, pointing to his skillful ability to grasp and

adapt to various film formats and configurations, a vital quality any great filmmaker should acquire besides his set of creative and artistic skills. His documentaries have come to stay and have carved an important niche and created a new dimension for the identity of Manipuri Cinema in the past decade.

While I have already discussed Aribam Syam Sharma's documentary films, there are the other documentary films that were being produced and directed by lesser known filmmakers in Manipur. In the same year that Aribam made his '*Sanaleibak Manipur*', M.A Singh had also directed two documentary films, ten minutes long each and shot in 35mm black and white, under the banner of DIPR, Manipur which were recordings of current events in the years 1979 to 1981. In 1984, Heisnam Kanhailal, the well known theatre director of Kalakshetra Manipur produced the documentary film '*Pebet*'. Directed by Lokhendra Arambam, another well known theatre personality, this film is based on the story of a popular Manipuri folktale. It was judged the Best Film in the non-fiction section of the International Short Film Festival in Calcutta 1985. In a similar fashion, the Avant Garde, a theatrical society based in Imphal produced the documentary film '*Totangkam*' in 1989, directed by Sanakhya Ibotombi. This film takes up on the theme of the ritualistic festival of a particular tribe in Manipur. The same director under the same banner of Avant Garde²⁷ produced '*Gorkha of Manipur*' in 1991. It took up as its subject the Gorkhas in service and in daily life as observed in the state. In the same year Sanakhya Ibotombi directed another Avant Garde²⁸ documentary film '*Yaoshang*' which, as the title denotes, is based on the annual Yaoshung festival of the Manipuris .

²⁷ Produced by B.R Chetri for the Avant Garde.

²⁸ Produced by R.K.Roy

In 1993, the film 'Moirang Parva' was produced as a joint production of the Directorate of Art and Culture, Government of Manipur and the East Zone Cultural Centre, Calcutta. Directed by L.Samarendra Singh, this film deals with the aesthetics of the 'Maoirang Parva' which is the traditional folk oral recital that narrates stories from the lives of the legendary characters Khamba and Thoibi of Moirang²⁹. Makhon Mani Mongshaba, a renowned actor and filmmaker in Manipur through his film '*Pena*'³⁰ in 1994 explored the philosophy and aesthetics of the traditional *Pena* music that has encaptured people of all walks of life and communities by its mystic, alluring renderings. The film also highlights *Pena* performance in Manipuri ritualistic performances. He has otherwise produced and directed several documentaries and teleplays under the banner of 'Sangai Films'.

Scripted by M.K Binodini, the film '*Laa*' directed by Thouyangba and Thoungamba in 1997, has for its subject the different uses of the banana leaf in the daily and customary life of the 'Meiteis'. There are certain associations of this leaf as part of their religious beliefs on particular occasions.

Having mentioned all these documentary films, it is not strange that one should find a certain strain of a strong cultural force behind the popularity and success of these films which have travelled throughout corners of the country and the world and manifested a unique identity and culture of a people. The Manipuri documentary films, much like their feature cinemas (or even more than), are obviously driven by a force deeply rooted in the socio-cultural milieu of Manipuri society. Certain tendencies towards a favoured 'pro-Meitei' identity of their films may also emerge

²⁹ Name of a district in Manipur.

³⁰ A traditional Manipuri musical instrument that resembles a bagpipe.

from the dominant themes of their films. In identifying such films as 'Manipuri' one could begin to question- what then of the other Manipuris³¹? How are they represented in the Manipuri films? There is obviously a sense of void in the involvement and portrayal of the various tribes and people of Manipur, the Meiteis being just one of them. While this has remained incomplete in the 'celluloid' era, much of the film making practice has emerged at the turn of this century. Filmmakers with their features films and documentaries about various ethnic tribes and groups have emerged at the turn of this decade through the 'democratising' medium of digital technology that has perhaps arisen from a desire to (rightfully) represent themselves amongst the pan-Manipuri identity in the larger fold of Manipuri Cinema. The digital format and especially the documentary genre has given these groups of people and their identity a place to visually manifest their respective and unique cultures and ethos. Nevertheless, Manipuri cinema in the celluloid era has by and large emerged as a visual archive of serious Art house cinema representing foremost a people and its culture, and also as a medium for meeting with artistic pursuits.

³¹ The Manipuris, for matters of discussion, include the rest of the various tribes that are prevalent in the state of Manipur besides the Meitei population which include the confluence of Kuki-Chin and Naga tribes like the Tangkhuls, Zelianrongs, Maos, Kukis, Hmars, etc.

CHAPTER 3

THE CONTEMPORARY DIGITAL FILMS: NEW MANIPURI CINEMA AWAKENING

New Film Technology and a new found Cinema in Manipur

April 9 2012 marked the four decades existence of Manipuri cinema- an achievement that does not seem too great when one takes into account the fact that Indian cinema is all set to celebrate its centenary next year. But then, Manipur, the tiny North-Eastern state known today to the outside world mainly for its numerous insurgent groups, the indefatigable Irom Sharmila¹, and its talented sportspersons including Olympic medal boxer M C Mary Kom, is also the state where celluloid died way back in 1998². Manipur is seen today as the only film industry in India that has gone fully digital rendering Manipuri cinema to be broadly classified into ‘celluloid cinema’ and ‘digital cinema’- each being supervised under two separate Film head organizations, an undertaking of the Manipur Government. Under the Manipur Film Development Corporation (MFDC) Manipur witnessed the golden years of its celluloid cinema in 1970s and 80s. Recent film makers of the present day in Manipur have adopted the newer digital film technology, a strong movement that is not absent in other corners of the globe, which falls under the support and supervision of the Manipur Film Forum. While I use the term, ‘contemporary’ with regard to Manipuri cinema, I have attempted to look at the time period between 2000 and onwards as the period in which celluloid feature films have come to be altogether replaced by video/digital films with

¹ Who has been fasting for 11 continuous years for the repeal of the draconian Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act 1958.

² <http://utpalborpujari.wordpress.com/2012/03/26>. Accessed on 20/7/2012

a strong movement in the documentary genre in Manipur besides their digital feature films. At the same time, I also look at this period as the era in which Manipuri digital feature films have come to be in profuse production and circulation, directing one to certain thoughts regarding the possibility of a stable film industry in Manipur.

'Yenning Amadi Likla', a feature film, produced in 2007 by Makhonmani Mongshaba, stood out as a rarity among its contemporary video digital films by virtue of its celluloid format for in fact, the celluloid films had gradually ceased to be produced from the mid 1990s. Being a costly medium, the causes for the gradual disappearance of the celluloid format in the Manipuri film making scenario are quite obvious. In his dissertation, Neikolie Kuotso has mentioned that with the cross-border transaction of cheap and pirated goods from across the border, new configurations in the economy and culture of the Northeast have been created. The strategic location of Manipur, sharing its porous boundary with Myanmar (via Moreh) has facilitated a new found trade and commerce in the state from the early 2000s. While Kuotso discusses the influx of pirated DVDs and goods via various circuits of piracy and distribution in reference to the Korean New wave, here, I specify the particular influx of various electronic gadgets, software and the latest digital technology equipments into the Manipuri market. With rapid advancements in technology (digital), gadgets and equipment like the still camera and video cameras that are continuously being modified and improved with finer configurations and settings of their software that has enabled their handling and possible utility with greater ease and higher efficiency. Digital technology has emerged with still and video cameras built into a single body of a gadget at very compact sizes. Such qualities have rendered digital film technology to be an alluring asset of great advantage to the aspiring filmmaker. In a

place like Manipur, where creativity and artistic skills seem heavily laden against the backdrop of a fractured economy, digital film technology has become a most cost effective and popular preference for the local film aspirants. Naturally, digital film technology has been a major factor in ushering in a great rise of filmmaking practices in Manipur from the early part of 2000.

While the same phenomenon may have caught up with the other neighbouring states like Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, etc., the case of Manipuri Digital cinema is distinct in its role of facilitating the entry of Digital Feature films to be screened at various National Film Festivals and different film competitions. In the early part of 2007, the Manipur Film Forum³ organized a week long ‘Festival of Manipuri Cinema’ where about fifty digital feature and documentary films were screened for critics and the film enthusiasts in Manipur⁴. The main objective of this festival was to promote the recognition and acceptance of the digital format of film making at higher levels. The Forum argued that cinema is foremost a medium of story-telling bearing the important role of reaching out to people in society with a particular message; and that it is a story-telling medium irrespective of the format it is made in. The Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, in July 2010, approved the demand/proposal of Manipur Film Forum for the inclusion of Manipuri digital films in the major national level competitions namely the National Film Awards and the Indian Panorama, benefitting other filmmakers from all across India as well. This is reflective of the strong affinity that the Manipuri filmmakers

³ An apex film body that specifically organizes and manages the various attributes of the Digital Films in Manipur. This organization was formed at the onset of the rise of the profuse digital films in Manipur. The MFDC was already formed otherwise for the organization and maintenance of its celluloid films.

⁴ Held at the Shankar Hall, Imphal where the office of the Manipur Film Forum is annexed. This place has become an important landmark for the various film movements and activities to promote Manipuri digital films.

have developed for cinema over the years and their inclination to explore their cinematic skills that have also been gradually groomed at professional institutions. Thus, by virtue of the digital medium, this phenomenon of the re-emergence of a strong film culture and the sheer proliferation of digital films in Manipur marks a vital landmark in the film history of Manipur as an era of the revival and resurrection of their once brilliant cinema that had been 'in coma' since the early nineties.

The rise of television and the video format in Manipur

From the mid 1990s, filmmakers using the video format instead of celluloid emerged in Manipur and this format became a notable feature of Manipuri cinema. Video technology was easier to afford and manipulate as compared to celluloid. The Negatives and positive prints of black and white films last pretty long, but colour celluloid films gradually fade off from their original quality even under proper maintenance. The videotapes on the other hand can be improved by various software devices via the AV model computer and video toasters. During this period when the electronic media had come to dominate the global communication system, most film makers sought this new medium, which in turn brought along new young directors. However, this medium brought in certain challenges as well for the initial filmmakers who were used to working in the celluloid format. According to critics like Meghachandra Kongbam, the change in the medium caught these film makers at a challenging transitional period where they were unable to make 'good' films like those of the 1970s. '*Urit Napangbi*' (1999) a lesser known film by Oken Amakcham, is the first Manipuri feature film that experimented with the video format and was

even released uncensored in a few halls in Imphal. Most video films produced shortly after, were generally of overall poor visual quality, especially in terms of inconsistent lighting and the illumination of a scene or subject, which indicates that the filmmakers were not able to handle and use the new medium creatively. Clearly there was a lack of knowledge on the part of these filmmakers in the configurations of the technical visual specifications of the video format. The video format, obviously, demanded a different method and technical treatment from the older formulas of celluloid films and cameras. It is the late 1990s that saw a lull of 'quality' Manipuri cinema in terms of its visuals as well as content in spite of an increased number of filmmakers in the state.

Although the video/ digital technology platform was established, this period proved futile for the production of more meaningful, visually appealing and serious feature films in Manipur, while further experimentation in the form of documentaries and music albums continued. At the same time, the feasibility of the production of a documentary film over a feature film drew a certain pattern of a rising number of individuals from untrained backgrounds who participated in the overall production of the documentary genre in the region. More often than not, a market for such films was not found as most were independent filmmakers who worked on themes of personal interest and were not supported by the various Government organizations. For such filmmakers, only much later, the internet medium, via the launch of 'You Tube' in 2005, seemed to be a viable platform for the exhibition and 'sharing' of their films.

At this point, one can also note, as R.K Bidur⁵ has mentioned, that the mid eighties in Manipur witnessed the rise of a new force known as the middle cinema which was designed to work within the limits of popular cinema with a high artistic contribution. However, he notes, it could not make progress for with the introduction of sponsored programmes on Indian television “the role of the middle cinema became more unbalanced and subsequently began to lose its artistic vision”. By this time, television had come to dominate even the artistic pursuits of a filmmaker. Bidur further mentions that the huge amount of money offered for T.V premiers, the taste of the sponsor, the rating game competition for the prime time slot-“all have created a situation where filmmakers had no alternative but to choose less complex and controversial subjects”. Thus, television in Manipur, came to accommodate the more compatible and ‘economic’ video films, slowly overthrowing the otherwise gigantic presence of celluloid films in their halls and theatres.

Digital feature film movement in Manipuri Cinema

Arguing against the ‘invasion of a hybrid Indian culture’ several armed outfits of North East India called for a ban in November 2003 on the Hindi films produced in Mumbai, popularly termed as ‘Bollywood’, in the entire North Eastern region of India. This statement was the outcome of appreciation towards the already taken steps by a lesser known insurgent group in Manipur in early 2000. In September 2000, the Revolutionary People’s Front (RPF), one of the oldest armed secessionist groups in India’s Northeast, banned Hindi films and Hindi satellite channels in the four districts

⁵ Taken from his article ‘*Talking about talking pictures*’ published in the souvenir of the 3rd Manipur State Film Festival 1999.

that make up the Manipur valley. The ban, it said, would stop the 'Indianisation' of the state. Hindi films were declared obscene and said to portray feudal values typical of India's Hindi-speaking heartland, and thus had the potential to undermine Manipuri values. An RPF spokesman went as far as threatening to bomb any cinema screening Hindi movies. The insurgent groups claimed that the commercial films made in Mumbai are devoid of any 'socio-cultural' values and that these stereotypical feature films have threatened to uproot the new generation in Manipur from their original socio-cultural values. According to them, Hindi films with their 'erotic' song and dance sequences have produced an imitation culture among the younger generation, disorienting their minds from their authentic cultural and moral codes. They also pointed out that the films have encouraged local filmmakers to insert 'Bollywood' formulas into their films and have thereby corrupted the identity of their 'regional' cinema. Cinema hall owners, Cable TV operators and filmmakers in the region complied with the appeal, sought for alternative film content, but in the meantime suffered great loss.

In Manipur, this ban was met with the closing down or conversion of several cinema halls into institutions, marketing complexes, etc. Operators and distributors faced heavy losses as there was hardly any film that could be released in the state. With a void of cinemas in the state, Manipuri audiences began to indulge in pirated DVDs of 'Hollywood' and other foreign films which heightened the rate of piracy in terms of other goods as well in the State. However, while Western and Hindi films had dominated the halls earlier in the city, resulting in hardly any screening of a Manipuri feature, their absence, without being decently replaced by other films, facilitated the rise of Manipuri digital feature films to meet the audience's appetite

for cinema and also in order to fulfil the filmmakers' artistic ambitions. By this time, cheaper digital film technology had become available to the masses. As we have discussed before, certain influx of piracy of goods across the border provided a platform even for the ordinary man to make his own 'videos' and films at a cheaper cost. 'Home videos', a popular phenomenon globally in this century via 'Youtube' and the internet was becoming a very popular trend in Manipur in the form of 'music videos' and 'home videos'. In the neighbouring states of Mizoram and Meghalaya, known for their artistic skills in music and singing, a strong movement of their popular 'Music Albums' and 'Music video' films prevailed and catered to the local tastes of the mass audience. Similarly in Manipur, quite like the imitation of the 'Chitrahari' songs that were earlier broadcast on television, which were ironically actually snippets from popular Hindi films, independent amateur music video filmmakers sprung up from various corners in the state of Manipur. Their popular Manipuri songs became picturized as music videos that would be telecast on their local cable channels. Local amateur actors and actresses would be taken for the video to lip sync the lyrics and run around in fields and gardens, a popular stereotype image of the song-dance sequence in Hindi Cinemas⁶. Crudely made with poor cinematographic sense, and shallow content or plot, the making of music albums in Manipur was a 'cheap', cost effective production that catered solely to entertain the audience; this would make any serious filmmaker in the state begin worrying about the fate of their overall filmmaking art.

⁶ Referring especially to the popular films made in Bombay in the 70s and 80s.

'Lanmei' (Wildfire) by filmmaker, Oken Amakcham⁷⁷ was the first Manipuri digital feature film that was released in 2002 after being certified by the Central Board of Film Certification, Guwahati. This year marked the emergence of digital films in Manipur and also saw the gradual rise of independent filmmakers. Most of them without a sound background in the training of the art of filmmaking, churned out films that can best be described as crude and raw in their treatment and filming method, while most stories were also ill-researched- the days of the 'Rookie' filmmaker in Manipur. One can assume that this was the trend because of the commercial angle; the filmmakers were inclined to as quick a means of profit at the expense of the passivity of the audience, and who were less involved in the more serious aesthetics and art of the cinema. At this point, their films did not face any competition from other film industries in the state and could therefore thrive at the halls. Much of the mindset of the Manipuri audience is also reflected by the very fact that such films, however crude, have remained popular. Firstly, it could be because of the initial thrill of watching a film that represented their own people and culture. Secondly, an audience with no knowledge of the technicalities of films and left with no other option were left to be satisfied with whatever they watched irrespective of how it was made- a story is a story. Furthermore, these films which narrated stories of the lives of the people in the region in contemporary times could be easily identified with by the audience. While most of their films attempted different genres, of comedy, horror, action, adventure, etc., the most popular genre was and remains the 'boy-meets-girl' love stories.

⁷⁷ The same director earlier attempted the first Manipuri video digital film *'Urit Napangbi'* in 1989 but was released uncensored.

On the one hand, these films are popular amongst the local audience, and on the other, they are highly ridiculed by film critics. It comes as no surprise that the films of these local filmmakers from untrained backgrounds of filmmaking, lacked a sense of professionalism in their cinematography and a depth in their content. On watching such films⁸, one would possibly identify monotonous stories, repeated plot motifs and stereotypical acting and narration in almost all their films. Editing a scene, which provides the overall tempo of the film, is another area in their films that lacked precision and mastery. The rough editing affected the film in the long run, altering the meaning and tempo of the desired situation and the event of a scene making the film time for a scene to appear either stretched too long or curtailed too soon, and thus losing its hold on the essence of the story altogether. Such observations bring up certain questions about the form of the film technology that was being used and that affected the content and overall aesthetic appeal of Manipuri films for the more serious film lover and critic. In corroboration of this view, filmmaker Haobam Paban Kumar⁹ had expressed that though sixty to seventy films are made annually in Manipur today¹⁰ there are hardly ten films since 2002 (when the digital films started) that have a strong universal content or even discuss issues about contemporary Manipur. The earlier Manipuri cinema (in the celluloid era) had done extremely well at national and international festivals mainly because of their content. Unfortunately, the films that are made in Manipur today are often 'boy- meets- girl' stories. However, if we look at the documentary and short filmmaking scenario in Manipur

⁸ Here I emphasize on the lesser known films attempted by amateur and 'rookie' directors of the 'fluffy' films like 'Amuktangdi uning-ee', 'Ei Ngaode', 'Maithakpi Chigoonglei', 'Keishamthong Thoibi', 'Lengdaba Lan', etc. among the many hundreds other Manipuri digital films.

⁹ As expressed in an interview with Utpal Borpujari on the topic of Manipuri Digital cinemas, as published in the Sunday Times of India, www.timesofindia.com, 25-03-2012.

¹⁰ In the year 2007, a record of 200 digital films being produced in Manipur was made, overtaking even Assam's profuse production of about 100 digital films being produced annually.

today, there is an observable and dramatic change in the last ten years since the coming of digital films. Today Manipuri documentaries have a strong presence in national and international platforms.

The search for a more meaningful Manipuri digital film

As discussed earlier, a festival of Manipuri Digital Cinema organized by the Manipur Film Forum was observed in 2007. *'Lanmei'* was aptly the opening film of the festival. More recently, in 2010, the 7th Manipur State Film Festival commemorated the journey of Manipuri Cinema from Celluloid to Digital. Through such festivals, glimpses of brilliance in the recent digital documentary and feature films can be noticed in terms of their cinematic language and in the treatment of the story in the Manipuri digital features. This is quite rightly the outcome of more filmmakers graduating from films schools and training institutions, rendering a touch of professionalism to their creative input. On the other hand, such film festivals provide a platform to encourage serious aspiring filmmakers from the state to make a more challenging 'meaningful' film. As a result, of the increase of films that are produced yearly, the past few years has seen films which in their consistency, flow, and clarity of story narration, and creative camera work, acting, editing, etc, have received positive remarks and feedback from film critics, journalists and the film enthusiasts.

'Basantagi Nongallamdai' (2006) was one of the few films that emerged with a different treatment to the otherwise stereotypical love story plot genre of the Manipuri film. A brief synopsis: Manimutum, the pampered son of wealthy parents, falls in love with his new teacher Sarla and sets out to woo her against all societal

taboos. At his father's request, Sarla, who sees him only as a student, pretends to respond to his feelings. Manimatam goes for further studies outside the state. Back home, Sarla meets with an unfortunate encounter and becomes HIV positive. The disclosure leads Manimatam to start a new journey in search for a cure for HIV/AIDS. This film manages to reach a certain level of sensitivity in rendering contemporary social concerns. It is also a story of love that transforms an ordinary person to pursuing extraordinary goals in life. Directed by Tej Kshetri, the film also explores a different level of a human relationship that is considered inappropriate in most societies. This plot structure, reminds one of the popular Korean Teleseries '*My tutor*' which had come to be a popular favourite among the Manipuri audience through the rampant influx of Korean dramas of the '*Hallyu*' Korean New wave in the region in the early 2000s. '*My tutor*' explores a romantic relationship of a student and his tutor while being challenged by the social norms and ethics of their (Korean) society. In many aspects, Korean culture shares much similarity with the various tribes and people of Manipur (and the North East India in general) in terms of facial appearance, lifestyle, food, etc. A popular trend set in along the lines of music, fashion, food, films, etc from the Korean New Wave, which makes a film such as '*Basantagi Nongallamdai*' a visual reflection of the contemporary audience in Manipur as well. It is also an indication of the taste they have acquired for popular '*Hallyu*' Korean cinemas.

'Bomb Blast' (2009) by Salam Birendra Singh, is a film set against the background of the current realities of Manipur insurgency, violence, corruption, and crime against women. Achou, separated in a bomb blast, from his two sons Loya and Chinglen, loses his sanity. However, Loya grows up to become an honest police

officer who falls in love with Linthoi, a gender activist, while Chinglen is a firebrand journalist exposing the evils of society. Fate brings the family together again after a series of twists, turns and intrigues. The film has a similar storyline to ‘*Chumthang Makhong*’ (2009) by Romi Meitei¹¹, which is a love story between Priyoranjan, son of a simple government employee and Linthoi, the only daughter from a wealthy family. Their short time together as fellow students preparing for the civil services is cut short by the untimely death of Priyoranjan’s father. With the burden of looking after his family, he becomes a farmer. But fate intervenes, and he is further transformed into the head of a revolutionary group and must now face his beloved Linthoi who has come home as a police officer. Through these films, a sense of struggle for survival is pertinent in the characterization of the individuals caught in the political turbulence of the region. The depiction of a police officer is seen as the solution to combat such struggles to fight against oppressors and provide justice for the people.

‘*Hayeng Kanana Pangani*’ (2010) is a film infused with the ideals and stories of Hijam Irabot¹² on the life of a young boy who grows up to become part of a revolutionary group in the state. On leave to undergo treatment for his recurrent illness, he introspects his life’s goals and goes to teach in a remote village in the hills. There he meets Lucy, the headman’s daughter and feels he must choose between love and his search for true brotherhood in the revolutionary group. In this film, the director L.Surjakanta Sharma¹³, introduces as a subject, the legendary freedom fighter

¹¹ A young aspiring filmmaker and lyricist from Manipur, he has written more than 150 songs for film and audio albums and directed around 25 digital feature films.

¹² He was a freedom fighter, politician and social activist from Manipur. He was one of the founder leaders of Communist Party of India (CPI) in Manipur.

¹³ A well known cinematographer in Manipuri celluloid cinema who has worked in around 10 Manipuri features at the capacities of cameraman, editor, producer and director.

of Manipur H.Irabot Singh, an icon of struggle for freedom among the Manipuris, to unfold the complexities of human relationships in the lives of the people existing amongst rampant violence and struggle. There is a sense of abandonment of love in order to respond to the needed call of revolting against the authorities, and in between is the struggle to hang on to two different worlds. A normal relationship between a man and woman gets submerged in the clamours of struggle and violence in the region.

'Mami Sami' (2008) directed by Ningthouja Lancha is a story depicting the life of the local people in the remote villages in Loktak against the background of insurgency in the area, through the role of 'Tayal', whose life as a young student takes a gradual turn of misfortune and tragedy as she grows up. It is the story of Tayal who is unable to go down the path of her heart's desire. While still caught in the grips of love for Wangthoi (played by Sadananda), she becomes Tombi's partner. Their simple life together is cut short by the ongoing armed conflict in the state. Tayal loses her sanity, Wangthoi nurses her back to health and into his heart. Then, Tombi, believed to have been shot dead, re-emerges as the leader of an underground group. Tayal must now find her way again amidst the shock and trauma. This film has beautifully used Loktak as the easel to depict the various aspects of the issues vexing the state. This film too is set against the backdrop of armed conflict in Manipur and how conflict tears apart hope and the very existence of individuals. But at a deeper level, it tells us of the complexity of human emotions. Literally translated as 'Victims of Time', this film crafted beautifully, has captured the charming landscape of the Loktak valley in Manipur. Just as a captivating smile can hide trillions of emotions - pain & suffering, loss & longing - the magnanimous Loktak lake in all its beautiful

glory hides behind it, humans struggling to eke out a daily existence. *Mami Sami* portrays the corruption of this idyllic place by victims of time, and is in fact a battle ground of low intensity armed conflict. A common ethos of the social world, where poor and the rich mingle on an equal footing is cleverly presented in a few scenes of the movie - one pertains to a hospital scene where the injured (of a rally) are not differentiated in terms of class or social positions, and another where Tayal's (main protagonist of the story, Binata) attire in *Mayek Naiba* and *Moirang phee* during a Lai Haraoba procession was as good as any other woman's from a rich family. There is another captivating scene - of an early morning, misty and blurred, when villagers of the landless floating hutments come out on their canoes to sell their goods. The canopy of tall eucalyptus trees against a background of the misty lake is a sight to behold; not to forget the haunting chanting of an ancient song rhythmically paced by the frantic strumming of the *pena*¹⁴ as a background score. One is reminded of masterworks of Aribam Syam Sharma for the sheer visuals and sound attempted by Lancha Ningthouja and even the complexity of the plot, although he cannot shake himself completely free from the dictates of commercial movie making. Unity and flow of the film is maintained through careful editing unlike other contemporary Manipuri digital films, where the seamless flow into the next scene is rare. This film has emerged as a yardstick of excellence in modern Manipuri cinema and a challenging example for other Manipuri films in times to come.

'*Nobap*' (2009) is another film that has been beautifully made against the setting of remote village life in Manipur. The director, Heisnam Tomba, has managed to reach out to the audience in making them voluntarily shorn off their present and

¹⁴ A Meitei traditional musical instrument that resembles a bagpipe attached with strings.

their environs completely, and gently descend into a small village, nestled in a mountainside---dusty, provincial and with all the imaginable signs of poverty written all over its soul and sinews. Once the director welcomes you there, he starts, amidst the dust and the pervading poverty, telling you the stories of human bondage, of human woes and smiles, of human longings and cruel social norms. This film is a moving and touching story of a group of little boys in a village who dream of having their own football team. In a poor village where even the facility of a school is abandoned, it is a regular taxi driver (played by Gokul) and a local tailor (played by Abenao) who aid these boys and provide a platform for them to enter into the junior state football tournament. This is also a beautiful love story of two people who share the same dream and convictions in life. Abenao and Gokul, with their roots in theatre, did not surprise anyone when they won awards for best acting at the State Film Festival.

'Ningthem (2008)' is another film that explores human relationships between parents and children, and more importantly between husband and wife looking at issues of divorce and re-marriage and the status of the Manipuri women. Panthoi finds that marriage and parenthood are not often as romantic as in her dreams. Falling prey to the intrigues of her father, she divorces her husband Lemba. Undaunted by hardships, Lemba tries to single-handedly raise their child. The child's yearning for the mother becomes an illness for the child. Doctor Athoibi tries her best to treat the child, but her growing love for the child results in another tussle with Panthoi. Lemba must untangle all these dilemmas for the sake of the child. It is eventually a story of a child's longing for his mother and the struggles and sacrifices a father makes for the child instead of the mother. The women in this film, directed by K. Bishwamitra

Singh¹⁵, are portrayed to be well accomplished and ambitious in life, and in a manner to break away somewhat from the clutches of patriarchal society that has for long dictated and curbed their freedom in many ways; the roles of Panthoi and Athoibi are a reflection of the status of Manipuri women today. Manipuri women have always played a very vital and active role in social movements. The role of women in these movements can be traced back to the pre British period when Manipur was under the monarchical system. But women's social movements emerged in an organized manner from the early part of the 20th century. Because of their high spirited struggle, many administrative reforms were then made, and women leaders emerged in Manipuri's traditionally male-dominated sphere of business, trade and commerce, which are distinctly manifested in their documentary films as well.

Bishwamitra's other film, '*Paokhum*' (2008), is the story of another woman, Kimboy, the daughter of the village chief of a small village in Molcham area on the Indo-Myanmar border. While most of the other 'women' films in Manipur portray or represent the perspectives of the Meitei women, this film takes as its subject, the women from the lesser known margins in the region. Kimboy is betrayed in love and abandoned by Amar Singh an army officer. Ananda, a constable posted in the village begins to fall in love with her and expresses his desire to start a life with her and her daughter. Kimboy after initially rejecting him becomes his wife. The ugly facet of armed violence rears its head and Kimboy loses her daughter in a bomb explosion. Along with her brother and other villagers she must flee from her native village. *Paokhum* is the story of her trials and tribulations before she is untimely re-united

¹⁵ A double graduate in Telecom Engineering and Arts, Bishwamitra is a theatre and film activist from Manipur, a familiar face in the world of Manipuri Cinema. He has directed seven Manipuri celluloid and thirty seven digital feature films.

with Ananda in Imphal, pointing to certain issues of displacement and the diasporas of the native people in the bordering regions of Manipur and Myanmar, affecting women most of all.

Based on the short story 'Kabok Oikhrabi Kaboklei' written by one of the foremost women writers of the state, Khaidem Pramodini, the film '*Kaboklei*' (2010), directed by Hilu Heikrujam, is a tragic film that traces the trials and tribulations of a woman in a decadent society, and the courage she must muster up to survive through all odds. The young Kaboklei is molested on her way to fetch the doctor for her paralyzed father. Fate also snatches both her parents soon after, leaving her an orphan. Helpless, she seeks refuge working as a helper girl in the house of a politician and finds true love and a friend in the eldest son of the family. After much struggle as a 'stigmatized' woman in society, she is able to express her feelings for him who by now has also developed a fondness for her. But before their love can grow, contented in her love for him, she is met by an unfortunate death, mourned by her beloved. In this film certain social issues of 'stigma' and caste system are explored. Well-researched and professionally executed in terms of acting and story line, this film, like '*Mami Sami*' is seen to be setting standards for more professional and 'deep' cinema from Manipur.

More recently, '*Phijjigee Mani*' (2011) directed by Oinam Gautam was selected for the Best Regional Film Award in Manipuri language at the 59th National Film awards for the year 2011. The 111 minutes film, made under the banner of Radha Govind Films, tells the story of a young girl Yaiphabee, who sets out on a journey to bring some changes and happiness in her family set against the background of sports, an area that Manipur has otherwise been known for to the rest of the world.

On the way, she is also disturbed by past memories of her home and her family. The film delivers a strong and beautiful message about the mother-son relationship, in present day Manipur. Leishangthem Tonthoingambi who plays the character of Yaiphabee in *Phijigee Mani* was also selected for the prestigious Best Supporting Actress Award and received the Rajat Kamal. This film after several years has brought Manipuri Cinema to honourable platforms once again, which is an indication of a 'meaningful' Manipuri Cinema being found once again in the age of Digital films.

Some of the short digital films

In Makhonmani's film *Eikhoi Tumlase*(2009), Narayan is an army man who was posted at the India- Bangladesh border and became crippled from a bullet injury. He receives a bravery award after the war but fails to accept his condition and begins to resent his friends and his family when he comes back home. He becomes an alcoholic in response to his despair while caught mostly in the daydreams of his glory days in the Army when he was able to serve his motherland., However, he dies in repentance untimely.

Cheng Khujok Ama (2010) a film by Menaka Thiyam¹⁶ is the story of a widow, Memtombi, and her seven year old son, facing the incurable disease of poverty. She goes to the market daily to sell vegetables. One evening she finds there

¹⁶ One of the few women directors that has emerged from Manipur in the digital age of film making, Menaka is the eldest daughter of theatre personality Ratan Thiyam. A graduate from Women Christian College, University of Chennai, she has received her Diploma in Direction, Acting, Camera, Lighting and Editing from the Asian Academy of Film and Television, Noida. Her debut film, 'Cheng Khujok Ama' received the Special Jury Mention at the Kalpanirjhar International Short Fiction Film Festival 2009, Kolkatta.

is no rice left at home, only to be left in shocked despair and helplessness. This predicament makes her restless and her own imagination takes her to a world of insanity. This short film is a reflection of the poverty-faceted reality of widows in Manipur who have to fend for themselves and their children.

'My cousin's village' (2010) explores, with a certain freshness, the life of Ibothoi, a young boy who chooses to spend his vacation at the countryside after appearing in his examinations. Spending his holidays with his cousin Angou, he revels in the company of his cousin and the other village boys. Away from the city, he experiences a more simple life in this village, till the day he finds out that life in the village is not all that innocent as it seems. Directed by Saikhom Ratan, this film explores interesting issues of rampant corruption and injustice for the farmers and the simple village folk. This film manifests the beautiful scenery of the villages in Manipur which is gradually dampened by the sub-text of the activities of richer city folk in exploiting the land and resources in the remote villages.

'Joseph Ki Macha' (2009) is another short film, directed by Bobby Wahengbam, which exposes a slice of the traumatized life of the people in Manipur through the life of Joseph and his wife Mary whose child goes missing. Mary forces the unwilling husband to visit the morgue to check or rule out the possibility of the death of their son on receiving a notice of an unclaimed body with similar features and the attire of their son. It is on his way to the morgue that the alarming law and order situation prevailing in the State haunts Joseph. Visuals, without a word, connotatively speak volumes of Joseph's disturbed and unstable mind. These visuals are further enhanced with the use of live footage shot in 16mm. Joseph's family is an index of the troubled families in Manipur.

At this point, one can argue that a film tradition like contemporary Manipuri cinema thrives in the age of the digital medium by the exploration of plots and stories set in contemporary times marked by challenging social and cultural issues, with a representation of their contemporary reality, where even their ‘fiction’ films seem to be identified as the ‘real’ image of society by the audience. There is no lack of creativity in their plots and stories although they seem to resound with a common theme of struggle and violence deeply etched into the very essence of their present lives, which their films have successfully managed to maneuver into and manifest. Similarly, there are other films, which have also come to contribute to chiseling the strong features and characteristics of their digital feature films.

The Digital Documentary films from Manipur

As mentioned earlier, documentary films in Manipur have found a place in the development of Manipur in the social, political and cultural fronts. The digital age has seen a boom of various documentaries made in this tiny state, some of which have marked a strong presence at national and international Film Festivals.

Romi Meitei’s ‘*Cease Baby’s Whimpering Cry*’ (2009) was officially nominated at three International Film Festivals¹⁷. His film explores the developmental stages of children in Manipur against the background of a fractured economy and insurgent activity. The film argues that the continuity and progressive change of human civilization depends largely on children, who, in the case of Manipur, are their only hope for a brighter future. This film hopes to educate the viewers, emphasizing

¹⁷ Mumbai International Film Festival 2010, SIGN 2009, Kerala and International Children Film Festival 2010, Lucknow.

that childhood is the most important stage of socialization, for the full flowering of one's personality so that they become useful members in society. The film reflects the lack of health care, nutrition and proper education for children, specifically in Manipur, where almost all activities, even school education, has been paralyzed by strikes, bandhs, and curfews in agitation and protest against the armed violence in the state.

'Nongpok Thongakpashingi Wari' (2009) is a documentary film by Ronel Haobam, of the small tribal community 'Uipo'¹⁸ in the few villages of the Chandel district in Manipur. In the absence of written records, oral narratives and folklore that tell the story of imagination, inhabitation, village establishment and human settlement in the form of ethno-musical traditions are the only source of the history and rich cultural heritage of these of the indigenous people. Khoibu is one of the oldest communities in Manipur, and in spite of the changing trends through the years, this community, which the director directs our attention to, has been able to retain their old customary practices and traditions. Their legends, according to the director, have a beautiful and heartwarming appeal, and this film, based on their legendary female characters is one of them. Depicting the simple lifestyle of the Khoibu people, the film is an eye-opener to the suffering of womenfolk at the onset of the present socio-political situation, where they have been the soft target for various social evils and their freedom and status are often compromised and sacrificed.

More recently, Ronel Haobam's *The Zeliangrongs* (2011) displays the folk art and culture of the Zeliangrong - a composite group of ethnic communities of common origin and socio cultural background (the Zeliangs, Rongmeis and Liangmeis). This

¹⁸ Better known as 'Khoibu'.

film highlights the rich cultural heritage and their traditional way of life which is on the brink of extinction. It shows various music and dance ceremonies and rituals that are similar and yet distinct from one tribe to the other. Ronel Haobam's 'exotic' documentary films continue to place the various faces and identities of the people cornered in the tiny state of Manipur on the map of the world.

Along similar subjects is the documentary '*Inampeil-Lin*' (2010) by Athokpam Priyobrata Singh on the Chothe tribe of Manipur. The Chothe is one of the oldest minority tribes in Manipur. According to the 2001 census, their population is a mere 2675. Already a very small tribe, the Chothe, although having its own traditional culture, is declining through the years, which is what the director focuses on. He emphasizes on the adoption of Christianity as a factor for the slow disappearance of their traditional culture, whose religious beliefs were originally animistic in nature. Lamlanghupi is the only remaining Chothe village still retaining its tradition. As such, the '*Inampeil-Lin*' is the Chothe's most important cultural festivity, celebrated for eight days during the early months of the year. The festivity opens with the worship of Chothe Thangwai Pakhangba, the supreme deity of their tribe. All villagers irrespective of their social status participate in the festivity. Thus, this film captures the life of people slowly disintegrating from their traditional roots, and the film will remain, maybe, in times to come as a vital visual archive of the indigenous people of Manipur.

Bobby Wahengbam's¹⁹ '*From Orphanage to Olympic*' (2008) is a film that unfolds how some underprivileged children in Manipur, including Olympian Dingko,

¹⁹ Havinf obtained his Diploma of Film Production from XIC, Mumbai and a certificate of Film Appreciation from FTIL,Pune, Bobby Wahengbam is credited with 11 television documentaries and 2 Telefilms.

the Asian Gold Medalist boxer, and some other inmates from the Orphanage in Imphal have distinguished themselves to represent India in the International sporting events²⁰. The film opines that the complexes potentially grown in destitution can be channelized fruitfully.

Besides these documentaries mentioned there are also biographical documentaries about noted personalities in the Manipuri community who have contributed to the development of society in its various capacities. '*G.Anita a Padmashree Recipient*' (2009) by Oken Amakcham is a film on Gurumayum Anita Devi, a formidable mountaineer hailing from the State who took to sports from a very young age. This film traces her life as a mountaineer beginning her training with the Manipur Mountaineering and Trekking Association and her enduring achievements during the 24 years while she was honoured by the President A.P.J Abdul Kalam with the prestigious Padmashree Award in 2004. Oken Amakcham's other documentary '*Ratan Thiyam The Man of Theatre*' (2008) is a biographical documentary film recording the life of the renowned writer, director, actor and painter Ratan Thiyam who is recognized as one of the leading theatre personalities not only in Manipur but in the national and international scenes as well.

Social and Political movements in Manipuri Documentary Films.

Towards the end of the decade, social and political activists sought the documentary form for their message and propaganda and began to dominate the documentaries with

²⁰ In the last thirteen years, eight international sports persons emerged out of the Children's home run by the Manipur Kalyan Samiti. The architects of such extraordinary achievements are, among others, coach Ibomcha and the Sports Authority of India.

themes of resistance, protests, empowerment of the Manipuri people against the government, demand for justice and the repeal of the military dominance from the state, etc. The 'wounded'²¹ political history of Manipur remains scarred to date with the event of the launch of Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA) on September 1958 in the State by the Parliament of India. This Act grants special powers to the armed forces in what the Act calls "disturbed areas" in the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura to the extent that the armed forces have the authority to fire upon any civilian on the account of suspicion of violence and attack. The outcome of the imposition of AFSPA is that it has led to a paralysis of the normal day to day living in the state and region, so much so, that their rich ethnic cultural history as portrayed in their earlier films is clouded over by their present day social and political crisis. If documentary films are said to capture the contemporary reality and life of a people, the documentaries from Manipur have effectively captured the life of its people and situation. Marked with insurgency for the past many decades, Manipur has seen a new set of independent young filmmakers who have presented a different image of Manipur in the light of its socio-political reality. A young woman has been on a fast to death demanding justice.

'My Body, My Weapon' (2007) is an award winning documentary film by Kavita Joshi that captures the silent decade long protest against the repeal of the AFSPA in the State by the 'Iron Lady of India', Irom Sharmila, a social activist and journalist from Manipur. 12 women disrobed publicly - in protest against the rape and murder of a young girl by the armed forces (Assam Rifles). *'Tales from the Margins'*

²¹ Borrowing from John Parratt's usage of the term to describe the state of Manipur in its recent socio-political turmoil, referring to the launch of the 'Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act' by the Central Government of India in 1958 which was in response to the insurgent terrorist groups and their operations in the North Eastern region and Northern region of Jammu and Kashmir. 'wounded Land: Politics and Identity in modern Manipur' 2005.

by the same director earlier in 2006, looked at the grim human rights situation in Manipur and the extraordinary protests by Manipuri women for justice who according to the director have sought “to use their bodies as their last weapon”. More recently in the earlier part of this year, Borun Thockchom’s *The Silent poet* received the Award for Best Documentary at the Mumbai International Film Awards. This film is an ode to the life of Irom Sharmila, depicted not only as a social icon for women in Manipur, but appealing to the poetic side of her life and identity.

‘*AFSPA 1958*’ is the documentary made by Sanju Bachaspati and Haobam Pabam Kumar in 2010 that has received several National and International Awards for portraying the day to day life and experience of oppression, pain, anger, and resistance of the people in Manipur. Being a television news journalist, Bachaspati, mentions that his accessibility to the incidents in Manipur made this film possible as a vivid and honest capture of the life in present Manipur. These news reels were later edited into a documentary by the well known Manipuri documentary filmmaker Haobam Pabam Kumar, a graduate of the Satyajit Ray Film and Television Institute, who had earlier won several National and International Awards for his documentary film *Mr. India*(2009). This film tells the story of a man from Manipur, Khundrakpam Pradip Kumar Singh, who is an inspiration for people living with HIV/AIDS in Manipur, and narrates how the life of this man although born much earlier, really began from March 2000 when he learnt of his condition.

On the similar lines are the other documentary films like ‘*Roshni*’ (2008) and ‘*My story: you and me*’ (2009). ‘*Roshni*’, a film by Bobby Wahengbam, discusses how people at large are not sensible enough to shed the persisting social stigma and discrimination against HIV infected victims. The film shares the journey of a young

woman, Roshni, who comes out openly, overcoming stigma and discrimination to avail care, treatment and support, and who later becomes a Support Provider initiating other PLHAs to come forward from hiding and live a life as normal as possible. Similarly, in *My Story: You and me* by Ronel Haobam, Shangrang Anal is depicted as one of the leading role models for other HIV positive women in her community. By coming out and working for the other victims, she has taken up a challenge to reduce and overcome stigma and discrimination in a closed tribal society such as hers.

'*April 6th*' (2010) is a documentary by Chandram Netraj that depicts the survival of and the means of livelihood for the young widows in Manipur who have lost their spouses in crossfire and encounters with the armed military forces in the state. The documentary specially focuses on the life of a young widow K. Renu who after the loss of her husband decides to form an organization with the help of certain NGOs to empower the numerous widows in Manipur. The documentary films of Manipur have clearly become a tool for the strong women's movement in Manipur in the recent decade. Together with other social issues and the various ethnic conflicts and strife, the frequent bandhs and curfews prevailing in the state and region, the documentary films from Manipur today hold an important and vital place and role as the voice of its silenced and wounded people.

At this point I would also like to briefly mention the various films- features and documentaries- attempted by lesser known filmmakers from various tribal communities in the state which have gradually emerged in the past few years. '*Mikdui*' (Tears) (2007) by Akenbou and *Nkhumei mikdui* (Bitter Tears) (2006) by P.G Samuel, are feature films that have emerged from the Rongmei community of the Tamenglong District in Manipur. These films were screened at the Manipuri Film

Festival that was recently held in March 2011, New Delhi. Both films narrate love stories working on the lines of a romantic melodrama. They have become a popular favourite among the Rongmei audience today who had previously scorned at the initial attempts of feature films in their community as long ago as 2000 with the feature *Panti Kiu Heidi Tha*. Similarly, there are films like ‘*Ihaimo-e Alibai-e*’²² and ‘*Thaohi Lya Paolaige*’ directed by K.K Paneey and L.Y Mathew from the Poumei community in Manipur and Nagaland. Some film critics might argue about their crude treatment of storytelling, compared to the ‘Meitei’ films. However, at this point, by such an emergence, a certain space in the identity of Manipuri cinema is also created for the representation of these communities which have for long been overshadowed by the ‘pro-Meitei’ tendencies in the identity of the cinema of the State. More recently, the documentary musical film *Songs of Mashangva*, produced and directed by Oinam Doren, won the 58th National Award for Best Ethnographic Film in the non-feature film category. The film traces the music of the Tangkhul Naga and its return to the modern age: as Naga Folk Blues. The protagonist Rewben Mashangva travels through the villages of the Tangkhul Naga to talk to the old people and collect songs and instruments. The rhythms, melodies and lyrics help form his own music, which he describes as Naga Folk Blues. It was shot for more than one and half years at Rajasthan, Nagaland, Kolkatta, Shillong, Imphal and other villages of Manipur, and has been shot in Tangkhul, Manipuri and English languages. These films have a very limited market, even more than the ‘Meitei’ films, as they subscribe, by virtue of their language/dialect, to a small audience located in their respective communities. Although commercially they are yet to structure a proper profitable market, a sense of

²² With absence of proper records of such films, the precise date of the release of this film is not known for sure, although some claim it was made in the late 1990s.

'local' taste and ethnicity authentic to their indigenous nature is achieved, giving Manipur cinema a pan-Manipuri outlook with a variety in language and cultures which becomes a notable feature of Manipuri Cinema today.

Thus, if one were to comment on the overall scenario of the documentary film genre in Manipur, it would probably be this: another facet of the reality of Manipuri society which is not reflected, or which has failed to be 'truly' reflected in their fiction or feature films, is figured in their short and documentary films without any sense of inferiority that has also been reflected in their claiming accolades, awards and appreciation in the global cinema world.

Acting and stardom in Manipur

Expressing the need to train Manipuri film actors to match with other film industries, the director of '*Mami Sami*', Ningthouja Lancha, who trained under Earnest Gusella and Tomiyo Sasaki of Full Bright Academy in the U.S. said,

In the industry when one actor comes to master the art of acting, and becomes a super star, his/her career seems to end there as the audiences also wants to see new faces and their interest shifts to newer actors joining the industry.²³

The success of any film depends largely on the understanding between the actor and the director. Ningthouja Lancha through this film has proved his caliber as a proficient director, foremost because he has explored and successfully manifested a newfound set of acting skills in the cast, who, before this film existed, were a recurrent name in almost all the Manipuri films with hardly any change in their character role and acting. This film has chosen to explore the deeper and intricate

²³ <http://kanglaonline.com/2012/07/tete-a-tete-with-ningthouja-lancha-on-manipuri-film-industry/> accessed on 27/7/2012.

complexities of human relationships and challenging situations, for which the actors must appropriately execute through their gestures, speech, movement, costume, etc. at the direction of the director.

Earlier, Master Leikhendra received the Best Child Artiste National Film Award of 1982 for his role in *Imagi Ningthem*. Kiranmala received Special Mention at the 38th National Film awards 1990 for her role as Maibi in *Ishanou*. The Acting department of Manipuri cinema is yet to prove its prowess with a certain standard of professionalism, maturity and variety, and Manipuri cinema can be criticized for the neglect of this department by the contemporary lesser known filmmakers in the region- a commercial angle lacking certain ethics. At the same time, the costume department has been a neglected area in contemporary Manipuri cinema. In 2001, the Kanglei Yawol Kanna Lup(KYKL)²⁴ called for a ban on women wearing attire and the dress codes that resembled ‘mainland’ India - saris, salwar-kameez, etc. As an outcome, their costumes are seen to heavily don ‘western’ outfits besides their traditional ‘Phanek’. While this may be a representation to an extent of contemporary women in Manipur today, the films have failed to express a sharp and distinct feature of the characters which appear flat and shallow without proper execution of their costume, attire and accessories. Besides the technical aspects, ill researched stories are reflected largely through the costume, make up, props, background (landscapes), dialogue, and acting, where the lack of depth in the character portrayal altogether accounts for the ‘crude’ nature of the film.. Proper representation of costumes go a long way in lending depth to a character in a film. In this context, there have been a few films of late that have shown glimpses of brilliance in the overall visual appeal

²⁴) KYKL, meaning ‘organization to save the revolutionary movement in Manipur’, is a Meitei terrorist group formed in January 1994.

and a steady improvement in the acting skills, as portrayed in films like ‘*Mami Sami*’, ‘*Kaboklei*’, ‘*Nobap*’, ‘*Phijigee Mani*’, etc.

Hamom Sadananda, who plays the role of ‘Wangthoi’ in ‘*Mami Sami*’ has claimed a certain cult status among the Manipuri audience today, remembered mainly for his role in his debut film ‘*Ingel gi atiya*’ (The sky of Autumn) and ‘*Mami Sami*’. He is likened as the Shah Rukh Khan of contemporary Manipuri Cinema having acted in more than 100 digital feature films and having achieved a considerable number of fans not just in Manipur but amongst the diasporas of Meiteis in other parts of the country and abroad. Joining the film industry in pursuit of his musical talents, he was instead offered to act in their films. Almost immediately, he had shown, as evident in ‘*Ingel gi atiya*’, a talent for acting. Without any professional training or experience in acting, he became an icon overnight. Although he has performed in various character roles in several films, one hardly notices a variety in his acting style, body language, etc. As observed, it would appear as excess or understated, but most times, monotonous. At the same time, the frequency of his appearance in almost all the digital features renders a sense of the mundane in his monotonous appearances. In such a case, the director’s role in shaping a particular character for the story is not met with. In ‘*Mami Sami*’ Sadananda plays the role of a school teacher ‘Wangthoi’, a well educated young man from a wealthy family. His movements, gestures, body language and choice of words are structured in such a way that a viewer can perceive him to be a quiet, introverted, polite and sincere individual, as required for the role in the story. *Mami Sami* would appear as one of his most challenging assignments as an actor since the film was shot over a span of almost three and half years. A tremendous consistency was needed on the part of the actors and on the part of the Director to

hold the tempo of the story, to portray the feel of reality in the film, and though shot over a large span of time, *Mami Sami* emerges as the most successful film ever made in the digital era of Manipuri films. It can be described as the most challenging film for all the cast, especially Sadananda who comes from an untrained background. In Manipur, his presence is also felt in the realm of music and even politics. Initially recognized to be a talented singer in the State, he is today, by virtue of his stardom, much admired, so much so that he is almost an influential political icon amongst the people who favour the particular political party he vouches for. Stardom and fandom enabling a synapse between cinema and politics in Manipur at a very 'local' level, seems to be a rising trend among other actors in the industry as well. Sadnanda can be described as one of the most influential and successful actors in the Manipuri digital film industry.

Abenao Elangbam with her various roles in almost fifty films today, the latest being '*Phijigee Mani*'(2011), is seen to be a rising star among the Manipuri film actresses. Her best performances are in films like '*Thoiba Thoibi*', '*Naoshum*', '*Akhunba Mani*', '*Red Rose*', '*Liklai*', '*Leikang Thamba*', '*Mani Thoiba*', '*Chumthang Makhong*', '*Da Sadananda*' etc. Abenao, started her acting career with stage performances. She was introduced to the art of acting by people behind People's Arts and Dramatics Association, Imphal. She is also seen to be one of the film activists in Manipur, supporting various film organizations in their demand for a State Film Policy and protesting against the strong Underground movement of various military outfits in the region who have for long curbed the growth of film production in Manipur.

Likewise, Binatan Laishram is another Manipuri actress who has shown her acting prowess in films such as "*Kaorage*", "*Dr. Yaima*", "*Lonna Lonna*", "*Meera Memcha*", "*Oiramle Mahaktumak*", "*Lucy Kamei*", etc. An immensely talented actress, she often dons melodramatic roles and sometimes takes up the role as a grown-up (as "mou"). Her role of 'Tayal' in *Mami Sami* is seen as one of her best performances till date. Her role as a school girl, carefree and fun loving, gradually transforming into a young married woman and later a heartbroken traumatized widow, coherently flowing throughout the film, makes her one of the most talented actresses in contemporary Manipuri cinema.

There had been many actors and actresses in Manipur who have abandoned a film project half way owing to numerous personal and unspecified reasons. Manda Leima is one such actress who left the Manipuri digital film revolution at the height of her acting career only to reappear again. Manda was awarded the North East TV People's Choice Awards, 2004 for Best Actress in Manipuri Films held at Guwahati, and was also conferred with the 1st Late P Kenedy Memory Film Fare Award, 2004. In the shooting of *Engengi Atiya*, she indicates the fact that every actor somehow establishes an unbreakable relationship with the characters they play and begin to subconsciously identify with the characters. Another difficult role she had to portray was while shooting for the film *Kaboklei*, an immortal story by Khaidem Pramodini. Completely different from the usual characters that she played, Manda portrayed the role of Kaboklei, a young enthusiastic girl, transformed into a lost heartbroken orphan girl through a series of unfortunate events in the story where she sets out to conceal her feelings for the man she loved, with a completely different kind of acting that was otherwise not attempted in her other films.

In the early part of this year, a sit down protest held at the Manipur Film Forum as an ongoing activity by several Film Organisations in Manipur demanding a State Film Policy and freedom from the threats of the military underground movement, has seen an active involvement of more actors and actresses which, in the long run, goes to symbolize a rising protest even among the local people, who have gradually become aware of the need for progress in their cinemas.

‘My Japanese Niece’: A silver lining in contemporary Manipuri Cinema

More recently, a young filmmaker, Mohen Naorem, better known for his 2010 movie *School Karushi* (Let Us Study) is among the few filmmakers who are giving Manipuri cinema a new stage on the global platform by giving serious thought to the more important issues of content and the significance of Manipuri history and culture at international levels of symbolism and identification. The director, currently working on an experimental film, *My Japanese Niece*, is all set to break a record in the history of Manipuri silver-screen as the most expensive film ever produced in the Manipuri Film industry. The filmmaker who has been researching on various subjects where Manipur is related to International events or issues such as the Second World War, associated with Japan, has decided to take this film as the first international project of Manipuri Cinema²⁵. While digital films used a considerable number of song and dance sequences, ironically a remnant of the taste for the Hindi films, *My Japanese Niece* is a serious drama avoiding romance, song and dance sequences. An adventure film filled with incidents of the memories of the Second World War, this

²⁵ He had expressed that since only few other stories are related with China, United Kingdom and Myanmar as compared to Japan, this film project on Japanese relevance with Manipur becomes very significant as it is attached to the heart and soul of every people living in Manipur.

film is set against a background of the wild jungles of Manipur. Offering a tribute to the Japanese soldiers and families who visit Imphal every year, this film has for its cast a Japanese model-actress, Yu Asada. As expressed by Naorem, the story of the film is to be projected as a real life incident and the thought of a Japanese actress essaying the role of the Japanese niece lends charm to the film. Such attempts render a different outlook to the fate of Manipuri digital films, and this film demonstrates that realism and Art cinema narration may be found again in Manipuri cinema. At the level of the market and distribution, this film attempts to be shot in Manipuri, Japanese and English, widening the scope of its market in the International scene. At the same time, this is an indication of the Manipuri diasporas located abroad especially seen in Singapore, Thailand, and other South East Asian countries. In that sense, Manipuri cinema in the contemporary may be seen to want to identify with South East Asian cultures rather than with an 'Indian' identity which has for long, in the political scene, been a problematic issue. In trying to identify its films as 'Manipuri', the impetus being provided at the political front, Manipuri filmmakers would project contemporary Manipuri cinema as breaking away from the 'Indian' identity largely infused and dominated by the popular 'Hindi cinema' by identifying itself with the other film cultures from Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, etc. which share a similar culture and lifestyle as the Manipuris.

To conclude, instead of mourning the death of celluloid, the quick shift to digital filmmaking, despite the limitations of screening opportunities, Manipuri Cinema is seen to be a growing vibrant film industry that continues to have a strong presence at the national and international levels, especially through their documentary films. However, there arises certain questions of a stable film industry in Manipur,

and the growth of its cinemas in terms of visual aesthetics and content, on the one hand and the networks of distribution and circulation on the other, which I shall address in the next and concluding chapter of this dissertation.

CONCLUSION:
INTERROGATING THE MANIPURI FILM INDUSTRY

According to L. Somi Roy, cinema is not yet established as the most important mass medium in Manipur¹. As he puts it, if at all there is a mass medium the radio is by far the most important in the state. But as in the rest of India, cinema has become the major source of cheap mass entertainment and consequently an important and effective medium. In the small state of Manipur, the Meitei's historical trait of unusual activity goes some way in explaining the slow growth of this industry. With this perspective one can perceive a certain amateur character of the Manipuri film industry.

The people in the industry, often established figures from theatre, music and literature, earn their living from other sources, usually business or government service. The producer of films in Manipur very often doubles up as the director, scriptwriter, music director, cameraman or an actor. And it is just as well he looks to his artistic satisfaction for sustenance. Owing to the financial frailty of Manipuri cinema and the general impoverishment of the State, the Manipuri film industry was not able to avail of the facilities given by the erstwhile Film Finance Corporation or the National Film Development Corporation which financed only a few filmmakers like Aribam Syam Sharma. State help provided by the MFDC was a paltry Rupees fifty thousand grant for a feature film in black and white, and Rupees one lakh for a colour feature film in celluloid. In the contemporary digital format, the grant of Rupees fifty thousand will hardly be enough even for the hiring of equipment.

¹¹ 'The Manipuri film', an article from the Cinewave 2 January 1982 published in 'Living Shadows' by Guwahati Cine Club.

According to records from the Manipur Film Forum (MFF) the budget of the average Manipuri film at this present day amounts to 4 or 5 lakh rupees. At this point, a more luxurious film making production has not been considered probably because of the tiny and limited market that these films circulate in which consists of the million-odd Meiteis in the valley and a handful scattered in the towns of the neighbouring state, Assam. With its peasant agriculture and absence of industrialization, Manipur has little of the differentiation and functional specializations so necessary to the film making art. The beginners' industry manned by the self-taught had always depended on Calcutta for these.

Looking back and looking ahead: Challenges for Manipuri Cinema

In spite of the abundant cultural and artistic potential that is apparent in the awards that Manipuri Cinema has received at the national and international levels, factors like the absence of a larger market, persistent low funds, the lack of more trained film artists, poor infrastructure and the underlying insurgency in the state, continue to pose the question of the survival of such a film practice as a flourishing industry. At this point, I would like to discuss the threats and opportunities, strengths and weaknesses of Manipuri cinema and direct attention to the idea of the practice of filmmaking in Manipur not merely as an artistic pursuit but as an economic professional venture, and to rethink the significance of Manipuri Cinema as a durable film industry, or rather, can it be called an industry at all?

At the most basic level, an industry may be defined as 'any type of economic or commercial activity producing goods or services'. It involves a considerable

number of man power and human resource in the chain of processing any raw material to a finished product, and carrying it to the service sector and eventually to research and development. The film industry, which is a part of the entertainment industry, thus, deals with the, production and distribution of films involving various networks and levels of film marketing. On the one hand, an industry is understood to be a stable and consistent commercial activity, and on the other, there is a steady chain of resources at all the levels necessary for the production; it should be self sufficient. For a film industry, this consistency is seen to be facilitated by the involvement of certain Government policies that ensure the continuing production and distribution of films besides the heavy man power that includes producers, directors, writers, editors, distributors, etc.

The situation of film making in Manipur is such that devoid of a State Film Policy as yet, a confident outlook on the consistency of the production of (meaningful) films in Manipur is yet to be considered seriously. According to the definition of an industry as mentioned above, at the levels of networks and market, the Manipuri film industry caters to a tiny market, very limited in its distribution (geographical and language barrier) and considered almost meager compared to the other Indian regional cinemas which have adopted certain film policies and have provided sustenance for the production of their films. In this situation, an industry such as the film industry, inherently an artistic department, would require the involvement of the Government in order to survive. In Assam, a State Film Policy was announced in 1994, making provisions for the refund of entertainment tax, and the compulsory exhibition of regional films with at least 150 shows in every cinema hall in the state. It provides a special grant and financial support for award winning

films and covers development of all aspects of the Assamese Film Industry. Likewise, in Karnataka, the Government provides a subsidy of Rupees 4 lakhs for a commercial film and Rupees 5 lakhs for an Art film. In West Bengal, the Government has reduced the entertainment tax from 100 to 80 per cent for English and Hindi films and from 100 to 50 per cent for Bengali films. Even the Punjab Government announced a State Film Policy in 1995. And yet, there is no State Film policy, and the need for one in Manipur.

Where Art meets technology, set against the background of a fractured economy, the Manipuri Film Industry is yet to be established. A self sufficient infrastructure is yet to be established in the overall process and development of the film industry in Manipur. Even after forty years of existence of their cinemas, a curious question may arise as to what factors limit the film making practice in Manipur in achieving the status of a flourishing film industry. There are various factors at various levels that hinder such developments.

It is, foremost, at the political level that most filmmakers have expressed their dissatisfaction of the overall progress of filmmaking in the State. As discussed before, the lack of a concrete Film Policy in Manipur has witnessed the persistent demand for such by the various Film bodies and Organizations, which seems to have been evaded at all times until today. The onslaught of Cable Television and Video on the entire film movement has been recognized everywhere in the world. The Government of India had also taken cognizance of the fact and necessary steps have been taken to meet the challenges in various States². Whereas most of the States have submitted the

² The High Powered Committee on the problems of the Film Industry constituted under the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting submitted its report containing 69 recommendations to the Government

implementation reports to the Center, six states including Manipur did not submit its report. The recommendations among others, include some percentage of entertainment tax to be earmarked for the development of the Film Industry; Award winning, Panorama and Children films be exempted from entertainment tax; concessional rates of electricity to be extended to cinema theatres; newly built cinema theatres be exempted from entertainment tax for five years; conversion of cinema theatres into commercial complexes be curbed and the construction of multiple theatres, complexes be encouraged. As a follow up action of the recommendations, many State Governments have announced their own film policies. The cost effective digital music videos and albums are produced not only in Manipur but in the North Eastern region as a whole. As observed in Assam, unlike Manipur, they have more cinema halls that cater to films made by their local filmmakers for the Assamese audience. In an attempt to improve the cinematic language of Assamese digital cinemas, a State Film Policy was formulated to provide grants and financial assistance to the more serious filmmakers. At the same time, they encouraged the professional training of amateur filmmakers and scholarship for such activities. As per records, until 2009, sixty to seventy digital feature films had been produced annually in Assam. The same cannot be said true for the case of Manipur.

Probing further, such a Film Policy may also be hindered by the ongoing underground operations in the region which has, for the past years, imposed several restrictions and bans on the content, theme and screening of the films. Such restrictions and the directive to work only within certain guidelines can be seen to limit the artistic creativity and expression of the filmmaker. As such, a problem of

in January 1990. Of them, 22 recommendations concerning the State Governments were communicated to the State Governments for implementation.

freely screening films in Manipur is evident. There are several days when cinema halls in Manipur call for strikes and bans to protest upon such an imposition. Either way, the very essence of film watching or going to the movies is dampened to a great extent- and this has become a vicious cycle in the state.

At another level, the inordinate time it takes for a finished film to be screened at the halls contributes to the irregularity and uncertainty of screenings in the city and towns of Manipur. A producer has to wait for at least two years before he gets to screen his film in a theatre. The audience profile in such a scenario would also appear to be pessimistic and diminishing.

The Manipuri film industry is a largely unrealized potential also since the State has a mere number of cinema halls, most of which have shut down in the past few years. A record from the MFF listed down the names of 84 halls that were initially present in Manipur until various socio-political factors calling for bans, strikes and curfew led to an economic depression in the industry and ultimately pushed almost all these halls to close down. Today only about 10 of these halls still exist but are faced with various economic challenges. Barely 4 to 5 of these halls have regular screenings. Furthermore, the State Government has so far failed to express concerns about improving the standard of their cinema halls. Most of the halls remain substandard in the capital city Imphal with no mention of a provision for construction and repairing of cinema halls in the State budget till date.

After the Hindi movie ban in 2000, many cinema halls were served notices by the State government for not screening Hindi films. On 31 October 2000, authorities in Imphal had asked cinema theatre owners to explain why their theatres were following the directive of a banned organisation. The authorities warned the owners

that failure to respond to the notice would invite cancellation of their licenses. Apparently, the then Manipur State Congress Party-led coalition government could not provide enough security to cinema owners to enable them to defy the diktat. Local cable operators were having an equally hard time³. Caught between the two forces, theatre-owners and cable operators in Manipur had no room to maneuver, and eventually tried to salvage their businesses with re-runs of old Manipuri films, Hollywood films and some regional Indian—non-Hindi—films, but could not woo audiences back.

And so it was, in this entertainment vacuum following the Hindi ban and without a decent replacement that something unexpected happened in Manipur: the Koreans moved in. In the early nineties, Arirang TV began beaming into many living rooms in the valley of Manipur. The Korean station was readily accepted as a refreshing change from the South Indian, Bhojpuri, Nepali and other regional Indian entertainment that cable operators had been experimenting with until then. Arirang's rise was almost like a fairytale- the channel made Korean culture a household aspiration among the Manipuri audience. Then came KBS, broadcasting mostly serials from the South Korean peninsula. Korean entertainment slowly gained a stronghold in Manipur and started to influence mainstream culture.

At the same time, this extremely small market is faced with great competition from the omnipresent commercial cinemas from Bombay and 'Hollywood' in the form of pirated DVDs, satellite television and the internet. These films have always

³ A rediff.com report of 16 October 2000 says, "Both the primary cable networks operating in Imphal [have been] shut down indefinitely by the RPF for violating its ban order on Hindi films and programmes. The Front seized equipment from the operators." They had broadcast a Hindi film the previous day. According to the report, on 15 October, members of the paramilitary Assam Rifles had forced the cable networks to air Hindi films. "Assam Rifles and the Manipur State government officials have, however, denied the charge," said the report.

been a major threat to the local cinema since the first cinema halls were set up in 1936. More recently, the '*Hallyu*' Korean New Wave through large piracy circuits in North East India has come to dominate the taste of the people in Manipur, especially among the youth, in terms of fashion, food, lifestyle, etc. and even cinema. Local filmmakers are also influenced to imitate the stereotypical dramas of the '*Hallyu*' cinema. Over the recent years, the topic of the Korean New Wave has emerged as a fresh area to be looked at seriously amongst film critics, film scholars and social intellectuals globally. It does not come as a surprise if they look towards the North East region of India, especially the state of Manipur, as a 'Little Korea' tucked into a small corner of the country. Thus, the shelf life of Manipuri films produced and screened at the local cinema halls is short lived. And in that way, most of their films, although produced profusely, are viewed as mere fleeting entertainment, temporary and not memorable to the tastes and preferences of the Manipuri audience in general. The market for Manipuri films continues to remain small and limited due to the medium of the films which are made in the 'Meiteilon' language. These films are screened and produced in the market without any subtitles in English or any other language which automatically limits the distribution of the films to the Meiteilon-speaking community only.

Film Festivals and Activities: Towards the survival of Manipuri Cinema

In 2010, the new building of the MFDC office was inaugurated⁴. A new theatre complex has been constructed in the building for the special purpose of the exhibition

⁴ As mentioned before in the first chapter, the MFDC building was met with an unfortunate event of a fire that destroyed much of its archive and films.

of 'quality' films-state, national and foreign films- in order to educate the tastes of the local filmmakers and encourage to produce finer films in Manipur not only in terms of content, but also in terms of the technical execution and exploring of newer and challenging genres. However, there is a question that lingers as to whether these few activities will ensure the survival of Manipuri cinema. There are some advantages that can be seen as a sign of hope for the Manipuri film industry. Today, a Manipuri film has a better run than the average Bombay or Hollywood film with the audience representing a broader cross-section of the populace (old women who seldom go to the cinemas rarely miss a Manipuri film, for instance). In a small place like Manipur, exhibition is virtually ensured since the Manipuri film needs only to be directly negotiated with the local exhibitor without threat from other films.

Although the film industry in Manipur is not as developed as in the other States, Imphal has otherwise been a centre for hosting Film Festivals, symposiums and workshops at the State, national and international levels. A Festival of films celebrating one hundred years of Cinema was held in Imphal in December 1996. Organized and sponsored by the National Film Archive of India (Pune), the North East Zone Cultural Centre (Dimapur) and the Manipur Film Development Cooperation Ltd. (Imphal), around ten films from around the world were screened which included *Seven Samurai* (1954) by Akira Kurosawa, *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940) by John Ford, *The Rules of the Game* (1939) by Jean Renoir, *Summer with Monika* (1953) by Ingmar Bergman, etc. Of the five films from the Indian section, Aribam Syam Sharma's *Imagi Ningthem* was one of the films screened along with Satyajit Ray's *Pather Panchali*, *Shejari* by V. Shantaram, *Do Bigha Zameen* by Bimal Roy and *Sandhiya Raagam* by Balu Mahendra. At the same time, a special section of

Manipuri Films⁵ was also screened. The celebration, which marked the beginning of the film movement in Paris in 1896 and its completion of a hundred years in 1996, also celebrated the completion of twenty five eventful years of Manipuri Cinema. Through such a Film Festival, where a century mark of World Cinema was being observed and felicitated, Manipur had the honour and privilege to host as well as share its common ability and love for the cinematic art with the rest of the world. Local aspiring filmmakers were given exposure to 'sound' cinemas, encouraging them to become aware and to produce better films in the region. A seminar on the topic 'Problems of Manipuri Cinema' was actively participated in by several other film critics, producers and directors from the State⁶ during this festival, and was addressed by Meghachandra Kongbam, who stated that "Manipur cinema can survive and prosper fruitfully if and only when a comprehensive and an affective state film policy is framed, adopted and implemented by the state government."⁷

A few months later, in March 1997, Manipur observed its twenty five years silver jubilee of Manipuri cinema. Various feature films, documentaries and short films from Manipur were screened. Although a nascent film industry then, much could be said about its achievement and its growing influence in the global movement of world cinema in spite of the lack in technical facilities and a proper Film Policy. A high level of dedication and 'spirit' on the part of the local filmmakers is perceivable now which is reflected in their films. In the following years, Manipur organized its

⁵ 'Matamgi Manipur' by Deb Kumar Bose, 'Brojendragee Luhongba' by S.N Chand, 'Kombirei' by G. Narayan Sharma, 'Ishanou' by Aribam Syam Sharma and 'mayophigee Macha' by Makhonmani Mongsaba.

⁶ Karam Monomohan, G. Narayan Sharma, Kongbrailatpam Ibohal Sharma, Moiranthem Ashwinikumar, Yengkhom Roma, Oken Amakcham, Kangabam Tomba, Laimayum Surjakanta Sharma.

⁷ 'A report on the seminar and symposium on Manipuri Cinema' by Salam Rajesh published in the souvenir of '25 years of Manipuri Cinema by MFDC, p57.

own State Film Festivals in order to recognize, encourage and felicitate a more substantial quality in their films. After a decade of observing its State Film Festivals organized by the Manipur Film Development Corporation (MFDC), the Manipur Film Forum organized its first digital Film Festival in 2007, marking its significance and influence in lobbying for and making the government accept that digital films would be screened at the Indian Panorama and other national levels of competition. More recently, the MFDC in collaboration with Films Division held the first and second Manipur International Documentary, Short and Animation Film Festival in 2009 and 2010 respectively. By 2009, Manipur produced its first animation film '*Keibu Keioiba*'⁸, directed by Bhumenjoy Kongsam, reflective of the awareness and zeal in keeping up with the contemporary genres and styles of film making around the world among the filmmakers of Manipur.

More recently, the MFDC in partnership with the Manipur Cultural Society, Delhi, CNES-JMI⁹, NEISR-JNU¹⁰ and DU¹¹ organized a Film Festival¹² of Manipuri Films that was screened at various educational and academic centers in the national capital. Besides the circulation of their films through distribution networks, such a film festival allows for the travelling and introduction of their (lesser known) films amongst audiences established within the intellectual and academic circles of film discussion and discourse, denoting that a certain academic pursuit is also sought after in and through their films and film activities.

⁸ The film narrates a story from the oral folklore of the Meitei community where a medicine man finds a way of transforming himself into a half tiger, and to his horror is unable to change back and therefore goes to live in hiding in the jungles.

⁹ Jamia Milia Islamia University, New Delhi

¹⁰ Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi

¹¹ Delhi University, New Delhi

¹² 'Nongpokthong': Visages from the East.

The most recent of the film festivals organized by MFDC, is the international film festival¹³ on sports and performance held in January 2012 in association with ‘Hun-tre¹⁴! International Manipuri Projects’. A similar film festival was earlier held in 2010 in Imphal. ‘Hun-tre!’ is a non-profit organization engaged in the development and expansion of the athletic, artistic, educational, entrepreneurial and scientific activities of Manipur at international levels. As such, one of this is Manipuri Cinema. ‘Re:Play 2012’ is a digital festival of non-fiction films that takes a best-of-fest approach to bring selections from distinguished international film festivals. Such a film festival pays special attention to films about sports and performance in recognition of Manipur’s distinction in these fields¹⁵.

Thus, through such film festivals under the supervision of the MFDC and the MFF along with other National Film agencies and organizations, a film culture and exposure exists among the Manipuri audience, encouraging the practice of ‘good’ film making despite being faced with various bans and impositions by insurgent outfits and the overall fractured economy in the state. While the survival of Manipuri Cinema may seem bleak without the presence of their Film Policy, the fate of Manipuri cinema appears to lie at the mercy of the various film festivals, and other film activities like symposiums, discussions, seminars, workshops, etc under the strong influence of the film societies and the film organizations in the State.

¹³ ‘Re: Play 2012’ Internesenal Film Kumhei

¹⁴ Hun-tré! is the umpire’s cry for ‘Play!’ in traditional Manipuri polo.

¹⁵ <http://www.huntre.org/AboutFestival.html> accessed on 25/07/2012.

Recommendations for the survival of Manipuri Cinema

The cinema in Manipur has not been able to be a commercial proposition and the producers of Manipuri films have worked for the love of the art and the culture of the people. Certain recommendations were brought to the Government regarding the survival and expansion of Manipuri films as early as 1996 by the MFDC which have been reiterated over the years till date, with hardly any positive outcome. The forum has argued that the entertainment tax collected from cine-goers from all Manipuri feature films should be made available to the producers and that the producer of the film, whose picture is exhibited at the cinema halls, should be allowed to collect the amount of entertainment tax of the shows from the counter of the cinema hall.

Many non-feature films are produced in Manipur and they are precious perspectives on Manipuri life, art and culture. They are equally important as feature films. It was recommended by the MFDC that the Government of Manipur enhances the subsidy for filmmakers to continue such a practice without much constraint. At the same time, encouragement and help for Award winning films through incentives be granted to the film maker.

Finding exhibition halls for Manipuri films is a problem since most of the exhibitors in Manipur are under the direct control of distributors who try to push through the films of their choice for obvious reasons. In Assam, there is a directive of compulsory screening of regional films for a minimum of 150 shows in the cinema houses. A similar request has been brought to the state government to issue a mandatory directive to cinema houses in Manipur to screen at least 84 shows of Manipuri films of their choice compulsorily in a year. Further the producers of newly

released films face problems of finding exhibition halls in spite of the terms and conditions agreed to between them and the exhibitors. It was therefore recommended to the State Government to make arrangements for the exhibition of newly released films for a minimum period of 3 months.

The artistes and technicians of Manipur are mostly employees of the Government who have not been allowed to participate in film-making in a regular way. This restriction appears to directly affect the film industry by way of the producers failing to get the service of artistes and technicians. Yet on the other hand, no such restriction is there with respect to dancers, musicians, sports persons and theatre persons. It is therefore recommended that the State Government should revoke such restrictions and make arrangements to grant leave to these categories of employees.

Lastly, for the development and progress of Manipuri cinema, the MFDC has initiated action on the following points:

1. To start a Film library where copies of Manipuri films and other reputed National and International films should be collected together with films on theatre, ballet, dance and video films, etc. with the facility for exhibition, discussion, etc.
2. To start a Manipuri Film Archives under the guidance of MFDC, where prints of all Manipuri films produced, still photographs, film scripts, posters, bills, tickets, brochures, press cuttings and every other material related to film production may be preserved.
3. To publish a book on the history of Manipuri Cinema.

4. To start a film training centre to impart training in different aspects of Film art, and other relevant aspects of film.
5. To make arrangements for the hosting of regional, national and international film festivals.
6. To arrange the holding of seminars, conferences, film appreciation courses and workshops regularly
7. To take appropriate measures to revive Film Societies and Clubs in Manipur

Through such activities, it is imagined that Manipuri cinema would be encouraged to carry on.

All said and done, a film is incomplete without an audience. The serious film maker in Manipur faces the classic dilemma of how to beat the system: whether to be uncompromising with his artistic bend, or to work within the commercial system and build an audience. A film maker faces the challenge to attract and entertain the audience's expectations who are otherwise surrounded by varied forms of entertainment in this present age, the cinema being just one of them.

To conclude, Manipur has potential and is not lacking in terms of artistic talent or content. While a state film policy is still not formulated, Manipuri cinema can be seen as successful artistically. However, its film 'industry' status- of sustenance and stability- is somewhat like walking on the tight rope. Thus, at this point, it is not possible to see the Manipuri film making practice cohere into and become a robust Film industry. Until a State Film Policy is adopted, the question of a stable industry persists.

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