

**THE IMPACT OF CRAFT OF THEATRE ON THE  
AESTHETIC CULTURE OF SOCIETY: A STUDY OF  
SHUMANG LILA IN MANIPUR**

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**KSHETRIMAYUM IMOKANTA SINGH**



**CENTRE FOR THE STUDY OF SOCIAL SYSTEMS  
SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES  
JAWAHARLAL NEHRU UNIVERSITY  
NEW DELHI – 110067  
INDIA  
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जवाहरलाल नेहरू विश्वविद्यालय  
JAWAHARLAL NEHRU UNIVERSITY  
NEW DELHI - 110067

Centre for the Study of Social Systems  
School of Social Sciences

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CERTIFICATE

This dissertation entitled "*The impact of craft of theatre on the aesthetic culture of society: A study of Shumang lila in Manipur*", submitted in partial fulfillment for the M.Phil. degree of this University has not been previously submitted for any other degree of this or any other university and is my original work.

KSHETRIMAYUM IMOKANTA SINGH.

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

Prof. EHSANUL HAQ

(CHAIRPERSON)

Chairperson  
CSSS/SSS,  
Jawaharlal Nehru University  
New Delhi-110067

Dr. SUSAN VISVANATHAN

(SUPERVISOR)

Associate Professor  
Centre for the Study of Social Systems  
School of Social Sciences  
Jawaharlal Nehru University  
New Delhi-110067

**TO,**

**BABA, SHREE KSHETRIMAYUM IBOTOMBI  
( LABANGO ) SINGH  
AND  
IMA, SMT. KSHETRIMAYUM HEMOLATA DEVI.  
— LABANGALATA —**

**WITH LOVE.**

**— LET PEACE PREVAIL EVERYWHERE —**

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# **PROLOGUE:**

## **CHAPTER 1**

# A JOURNEY FROM THEATRE TO SOCIETY

Shakespeare had rightly pointed out in his play, "As you like it"-

All the World is a stage  
And all the men and women merely players;  
They have their exits and their entrances;  
And one man in his time plays many parts

(Act 2, scene vii)

Following this assumption, I would argue like Erving Goffman, that society produces members who play all kinds of roles, which are integral to the very nature of social existence. Again, role theory has a very old and important part in sociological theory. There is an analogy between theatre and the society, which is very old, but the sociological study on this analogy is comparatively recent. Theatre has every ingredient of aesthetics like make-up, costume, mask, stage, curtains, scenery, light etc. In the same way, society also possesses every nuance of aesthetics because life is not a monochromatic painting. This way, living itself becomes an art, the art of impression management.

The age-old analogy between theatre and society can be recreated here to remind the readers that they are also actors (if they have forgotten for the time being). Starting with Shakespeare, the concept of stage can be analogized with the nature of social organization, the concept of players with the nature of the individuals and the vision of men and women as "merely players" who have "their exits and their entrances" can be seen at par with the relationship of individuals to patterns of social organization.<sup>1</sup> We can elaborate this exercise little further. Just as players have a clearly defined part to play, so actors in society must follow norms; just as players must obey the orders of a director, so actors in society must conform to the dictates of those with power or those of importance; just as players must react to each other's performance on the stage, so members of society must mutually adjust their responses to one another; just as players

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<sup>1</sup> Turner, Jonathan H. – The Structure of Sociological theory, 1987, Rawat Publications, Jaipur. P-355

respond to the audience, so actors in society take the role of various audiences or 'generalized others'; and just as players with varying abilities and capacities bring to each role their unique interpretations, so, actors with varying self-conceptions and role-playing skills have their own styles of interactions.

The theatre and society are not watertight compartments. There is a filmy wall, which is porous, between the two. There is always a threat (or pleasure) of this analogy turning into a homology. Despite this vulnerability, theatre can, still, be set apart from day-to-day dealings of society. While real life can be read as a narrative, the difference of it from theatre lies in that the theatre has got a fabricated space on which the players perform their acts and a limited time within which the performance is carried out in front of an already present audience. So, theatre is an address by an individual or a group of individuals to a number of people. It is a communication between the performers and the spectators. But it is different from the communication in the day-to-day life such as a casual conversation about the scorching summer or about a beautiful woman who has just passed by. Each of these is an expression of ideas or emotions. The difference of these from the work of theatre in particular and art in general lies in that the meaning in the former is single and apparent.<sup>2</sup> But in the work of theatre (or art), there are always two meanings and the apparent meaning is not the essential one but is only a symbol for a hidden meaning. It can be discerned in such an expression as 'art is really saying something and meaning something else.' There is an evident link with dreams, jokes, metaphors and symbolism. All the theatrical performances share at least one underlying quality-performance behaviour. Performance behaviour<sup>3</sup> is not free and easy. It is known and/or practiced behaviour- or 'twice-behaved behaviour', restored behaviour'- either rehearsed, previously known, learned by osmosis since early childhood, revealed during the performance by masters, guides, gurus, or elders or generated by rules that govern the outcome. This means performance behaviour never wholly belongs to the performer. It is something, which is learned and imposed upon the performer during performance.

Let us dwell, further, for sometime, in the realm of art. Arts can be divided into two broad forms.<sup>4</sup> The first one is called '*creative art*' which is the art of making something-an object, a picture, a story, a musical composition-which embodies the message the artist wants to convey to the public. The second form of art is called '*Executive*' or '*performing art*' which is the art of doing or performing something-speaking, moving, playing an instrument etc. Creative art does

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<sup>2</sup> Southern, Richard -- the Seven ages of the theatre. 1962, Faber and Faber, London. P-24

<sup>3</sup> Schechner, Richard -- Performative circumstances from the Avant Garde to Ramlila. 1983, Seagull books, Calcutta. P-91.

<sup>4</sup> Southern, Richard, op. cit. p-23

not demand direct contact between the artist and the public 'out there'. On the other hand, in performing art, it is absolutely essential that the performers come into direct contact with the public. This means one can enjoy *M. F. Husain* at an exhibition at *Modern Art gallery, New Delhi*, while he is actually present in a premiere of his film-*Gaja Gamini* in London. But one can not enjoy *Girish Karnad* as actor when he is not actually performing on the stage, unless it has been filmed. This way, theatre also comes under the territory of performing art.

In this chapter, I will try to delve into some of the concepts, which are relevant in properly studying theatre and their application to the analysis of social relationship. First of all the focus will be concentrated on the distinction between theatre and drama. Then I will move towards the coexistence of theatre and ritual. In this connection the continuum of efficacy and entertainment will be studied. Again the realm of drama and rituals will be further explored by employing the concepts of transportation and transformation. Then it will be time to enlighten ourselves with the concepts of ingredients, which are necessary for the successful production of theatre such as actor, director, audience, make-up, costume, mask etc. Next step in this process will be to see how these intricacies of theatrical production can be employed in the study of the social structure itself. In fact there can be two ways of approaching to the core of the issues, which I am dealing within my whole work. First can be the micro-sociological study of the society from the interactionist perspective. In other words, there will be dramaturgical study of social interaction among individuals in the society. The second approach is the sociological study of theatre- both its forms and contents.

### **DRAMA AND THEATRE**

Many people use the concepts of drama and theatre coextensively without giving much significance to the basic intricacies lying behind each of them. At the same time many people, in common parlance, use theatre as a place for the performance of plays (a seeing place). In fact, the concept of theatre is more extensive than the concept of drama itself. There is a relationship of 'encompassing' and 'encompassed' between theatre and drama respectively.

Drama is the representation by gestures of the situation and the condition of people as affected by their pleasurable and unpleasurable feelings.<sup>5</sup> It consists of something more than words. This something consists of the emotion and its intensity expressed in their intonations, the presentation of their characteristic features under the stress of different emotions, the temperament of actors putting an original significance into the lifeless words of the drama. So,

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<sup>5</sup> Gupta, Chandra Bhan – The Indian theatre, 1991, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd. P-9

the essence of drama is not words but action. In common parlance, the word dramatic also means something filled with action, emotion or exciting qualities. This way, plays are written to be enacted, not just to be read in one's private room. In Aristotle's<sup>6</sup> classic definition, a tragedy (that is a play), is an imitation of action. The word tragedy itself means, literally, a goat song, which refers, apparently, either to an ancient religious ritual in which a goat was sacrificed or to the goatskin, which the performers wore. Comedy means a festivity with music and dancing or a festal procession.

As drama gives precedence to action than words, all the dramas (plays) can not be labeled as successful until and unless they are successful when enacted before an audience. Drama must not be just a literary art. It is more than this. A great drama is almost certainly a great work of literature, but it does not imply that a great work of literature, written in the form of a play, is a great drama. All the writers, though they may try, cannot become good dramatists. Why Shakespeare and G.B. Shaw are immortal playwrights is because they are deft in the craft of theatre, apart from being excellent writers. If a writer (or playwright) lacks the understanding of the nature of drama or is unable to master stage technique, he/she can not produce a play meant for presentation on a stage. The fate of such plays will be confined to the pages of the book to be read and enjoyed in the privacy of one's study. Such dramas are rightly known as "Closet dramas".

A drama can be presented even without the utterance of a single word. An audience can be made to burst into a thunder of laughter or to shed tears uncontrollably by the nonverbal enactment of a theme. It is a wonder how a drama can build up an imaginary world sheerly with the help of action. An audience is mesmerized and taken to the realm of dream, even if it does know that it is not real, and is weakened to submit to the emotions. An excellent example of dramatic representation is the silent movies. They do not have a selected audience. They are universal and enjoyed and understood by both literates (scholars included) and illiterates. Likewise, many opera-goers understand very well what is happening on the stage and, in substance, what the performers are singing about, though they could not understand the words even if the singers succeeded in making them intelligible. Apart from this many rituals related to puberty, initiation, purification, marriage, death, hunting, warfare, the harvesting etc. have dramatic elements. Even a stranger can make out what the ritual conveys, through the window of his eyes (not with his ears). This will be elaborated later in this chapter and in the next chapter. So, a witticism or verbal quip will seldom provoke as much laughter as an incongruous

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<sup>6</sup> Rice, Elmer – The living theatre, 1960, William Heinemann Ltd. London, p-15



confrontation of characters or a physical embarrassment, known in theatrical circles as situation laughs or sight gags.<sup>7</sup>

Let us now look at drama from various classical Indian dramaturgical treatises, as drama is one of the oldest art forms in India. If we talk of Indian drama, we must start from Bharata's *Natyasastra* the earliest authority in India on the presentation of drama on the stage. The origin of Indian drama is well explained in this treatise. According to it, Gods<sup>8</sup> entreated Brahma to produce something to play, which could be seen and also heard, a fifth Veda, that would benefit all castes (*Sarvavarnika*). Accordingly Brahma extracted recitation (*Pathya*) from the *Rigveda*, song (*gita*) from the *Samaveda*, the art of acting (*abhinaya*) from the *Yajurveda* and sentiment (*rasa*) from the *Atharvaveda* and produced *Natyaveda* as the fifth Veda. Subsequently he asked Bharata to present this Veda to the mankind by bringing into practice the precepts with the help of his sons and disciples and *Gandharvas* and *Apsaras* as the actors and actresses at the "banner festival of Indra". The entire content of the *Natyaveda* enraged *asuras* (demons) as it projected them in bad taste and they waged war against the gods. Indra, then, defeated them and explained to them that the drama was a representation of facts of a general nature and would not be deliberately applied to anybody. Other related stories of the origin of Indian drama can be found in other treatises such as the *Abhinavabharati* of *Abhinavagupta*, the *Abhinayadarpana* of *Nandikesvara* etc.

Drama or the art of histrionic is called *Natya* in Sanskrit. But apart from *Natya* there are two other arts of dancing called *Nrtta* and *Nrtya*, which help in the effective presentation of it. It will be important to clarify the terms *Natya*, *Nrtta* and *Nrtya*, before we move further. Etymologically *Nrtta* and *Nrtya* are derived from *nrt* and *natya* from *nat*.<sup>9</sup> The earliest reference to *nrt* is found in the *Rigveda* while that of *nat* in Panini. This means the former is earlier in origin than the latter. Still the arts *Nrtta* and *Nrtya* are not exactly the same. On the basics, *nrtta* involved *tala* (rhythm) and *laya* (tune) only and not *bhava* (emotion), while *Nrtya* was essentially connected with *Bhava* (emotion). Arousing emotions in the minds of audience is a more difficult task than just bodily movement. This means *Nrtta* is older between the two and is the original form of entertainment on which *Nrtya* was an improvement. *Nrtta*, thus, is dance while *nrtya* is mimetic art having gestures. *Natya* is the most evolved of the three and is the combination of dance, music and drama (including speech) that is entertaining, delighting and instructing.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> *ibid.* p-17

<sup>8</sup> Gupta, Chandra Bhan op. cit. p-1

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.* p-112

<sup>10</sup> Pande, Anupa – The *Natyasastra* tradition and ancient Indian Society, 1993, Kusumanjali Prakashan, Jodhpur., op. cit.p-7

Among its elements *rasa* (sentiment) is the most important, making it quite advanced than *Nrtya* which can produce only *bhava* (emotion) not *rasa* (sentiment).

Let us pause here, for a while, and understand the distinction between *Bhava* (emotion) and *rasa* (sentiment) in order to grasp the essence of Indian drama. Bharata describes the nature of *rasa* as follows:<sup>11</sup>-: "What are known in ordinary language as causes, effects and auxiliaries of the latent emotion of love and the like, come to be spoken as excitants, ensuants and variants respectively when found in drama and poetry and when the latent emotion comes to be manifested by these, it is known as *rasa*." For Bharata the object of imitation seems to be primarily *Bhava* in its diverse varieties and phases and the mood or impression produced by this imitation, the total dramatic effect on the spectators, appears to be *rasa*. *Rasa* denotes not only the qualitative essence of the play but also the peculiar quality of experience it enables the spectator to achieve. A distinction between *rasa* (sentiment) and *bhava* (emotion) can be drawn here. Emotion may be both pleasant and unpleasant but a sentiment is always pleasurable and unique.<sup>12</sup> There is no unpleasantness in a sentiment as it is aroused through a process of generalization. This explains why the pathetic (*Karuna*) and repulsive (*bibhatsa*) sentiments find place in the scheme of *rasa*. These two can be unpleasant as *bhava* but when generalized become pure and pleasurable. This is aesthetic pleasure. According to Abhinavagupta, aesthetic pleasure has no reference to the actual feelings common in the world of realities but to dormant mental conditions awakened under certain circumstances. A particular *rasa* is pleasurable not exclusively because of its nature. This means the erotic sentiment (*srngara rasa*) is pleasurable not because it is *srngara* but because the spectator has his mind rid of distraction. So, the pleasure, a spectator gets from different *rasas* is not a mundane one but the transcendental pleasure aroused by the aesthetic nature of the drama. There are eight *rasas*<sup>13</sup> found in Sanskrit dramas. They are-

- (1) ***Srngara rasa*** (erotic sentiment)- It may be either in union or in separation. In union it should be represented with joy in the eyes and face, smile and sweet words, equanimity and rejoicing and pleasant movements of the limbs. In separation it should be accomplished by self disparagement, debility, apprehension, envy, weariness, painful reflection, longing, drowsiness, sleep, dreaming, wakening, sickness, derangements swoons, stupefaction and death.

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<sup>11</sup> Gupta, Chandra Bhan . p-12

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.* p-14

<sup>13</sup> *ibid* p-132

- (2) **Hasya rasa** (comic sentiment)- It is produced by strange dresses, ornaments, impudence, fickleness, roguery, senseless, drivels, ridicule, description of people's defects etc. and is represented by the movement of the lips, teeth, nose and cheeks etc.
- (3) **Karuna rasa** (pathetic sentiment)- It is represented through tears, lamentation, drying up of the mouth, change of colour, trembling, sighs and loss of memory.
- (4) **Vira rasa** (heroic sentiment)- It is represented by calmness, patience, prowess, pride, enthusiasm, influence, masterfulness and by words expressive of challenge.
- (5) **Raudra rasa** (furious sentiment)- It is shown in bloodshot eyes, perspiration, frowning, gnashing of teeth and biting of lips, blowing of cheeks, wringing of hands, hurling various weapons, cutting asunder the head, the trunk and the arms.
- (6) **Bhayanaka rasa** (terrifying sentiment)- It is represented by the trembling of hands and feet, restless eyes, change of colour and voice, stupefaction, contraction of limbs, palpitation of heart and by parched lips, palate and throat.
- (7) **Bibhatsa rasa** (repulsive sentiment)- It is brought out by contortions of the face and eyes, the covering up of the nose and lowering of the head followed by uncertain steps.
- (8) **Adbhuta rasa** (marvelous sentiment)- It is represented by eyes opened wide, restless glances, perspiration, joy, repeated appreciative exclamations, cries of 'he, ha' etc.

The arousal of above rasas is multiplied with the use of music- both vocal and instrumental- in addition to the bodily movements. So, Natya becomes a complex art with the intricate efforts to create these rasas to win the spectators. The *Abhijnanasakuntala*, the *Uttararamacarita* and *Venisamhara* mainly depict the erotic, pathetic and heroic sentiments respectively.

After exploring the landscape (or should we say dramascapc ! ) of Sanskrit drama let us come back again to our basic concern i.e.; drama and theatre. Now it is time we delve into the characteristics of theatre. As mentioned elsewhere, theatre, in its literal sense, is a place for the

performance of plays.<sup>14</sup> This place has two indispensable elements – one, a place for the performers and the other for the audience. But in advanced structure, some elements are also required to augment the aesthetics of dramatic presentation. These include good stage with scenery, both permanent and changeable; lighting system; seats for the spectators; lounges and lavatories; a lobby with a box office; and sometimes bars and refreshment rooms. In the backstage, there may be a green room, rehearsal space and workshops. All this helps in the dramatic enjoyment. But a theatre can be of different structures apart from the modern roofed building. It can be outdoor also i.e.; courtyard, town square or anywhere, but a theatre, in this simple sense of a viewing place is indispensable for the communication of drama.

What we have discussed is only the narrower sense of theatre. It has far and wider scope and connotation, comprising all the phases and mechanisms of play production. 'A theatre' is quite different from 'the theatre'.<sup>15</sup> The theatre includes, other than a physical viewing place, the multiple techniques required for the organization and projection of a dramatic presentation, the numerous and varied personal, both in the application of these techniques and the audience. In the aggregate, these constitute an institution that is not only cultural but also social; one that has an identity and a history of its own and is in many ways independent of the art of the drama. Richard Southern<sup>16</sup> says that drama may be '*the thing done*' but theatre is '*doing*'. Theatre is an art. The secret of theatre does not lie in the thing done but rather in something that arises from, the manner of doing.

The essential characteristic of the theatre – professional or amateur, commercial, subsidized or academic, is that it is a collective enterprise, in contrast to the dramatic art, which is almost wholly individualistic. This characteristic can be seen in three respects. Firstly, plays are written to be performed before an audience gathered in one place at one time. The audience moves along with the performers. This requires the play to be immediately apprehensible to the audience. This means there is the involvement of various theatrical techniques to make the end possible. Secondly, the projection of the play of a dramatist entails the skills and services of a director and actors, designers of costumes and scenery, stagehands, 'front-of-the-house' employees and managerial executives. All these must be coordinated in the carrying out of an organized plan. The individual expertise is subordinated to the concerted effort. This relationship also involves conflicts that are professional, economic and personal. Thirdly, the theatre is a public affair unlike reading a novel. It can not be confined to the four walls of a living room. It is

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<sup>14</sup> Rice, Elmer op. cit. p-24

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.* p-26

<sup>16</sup> Southern, Richard op. cit. p-22

out in the open. This makes it subject to many forms of public scrutiny, influence, and supervision. It also covers many facets, which have nothing to do with the drama as an art, e.g., taxes, building and fire prevention racial exclusion or segregation, political affiliations of personnel etc.

After seeing the characteristics of the theatre it is discerned that it has a form, an identity and a life of its own. In a sense it seems to exist for the purpose of serving the drama. As an institution, it has got ups and downs in its history. The theatre has also been constantly shaped by the state of society and the cultural climate. How phases of theatre are influenced by social milieu will be studied in the next chapter. But it would be right, here, to mention that there could be no art of the drama without the theatre (in broader sense).

### RITUALS AND THEATRE

Both ritual and theatre are performances because they share the commonest element 'action'. People may confuse whether a performance is a ritual or a theatre as there is a flimsy wall between the two. But they still have differences and it is important to make this distinction clear so as to see them from two different angles in this present work. In ritualistic performance, there is mass participation in the act. People congregate for a special occasion and every participant contributes to the materialization of the occasion. It is because of their common regard to the sacred world and its relations with the profane world. Here staying away means rejecting the congregation or being rejected by it as in excommunication, ostracism or exile.<sup>17</sup> If only a few stay away, it is those who are absent who suffer; if many stay away, the congregation is in danger of extinction. According to Durkheim,<sup>18</sup> "*The rites are a manner of acting which take rise in the midst of the assembled groups and which are destined to excite, maintain or recreate certain mental states in these groups. So, if the categories are of religious origin, they ought to participate in this nature common to all religious facts; they too should be social affairs and the product of collective thought.*" He further defines rites in relation to beliefs, which are two fundamental categories, which are present in most of the religious phenomena. Beliefs are thoughts while rites are actions. The rites are connected to a special class of objects. But the nature of special objects is expressed in beliefs. In this connection, he brings in the concepts of 'sacred' and 'profane' which is a bipartite division of the whole universe from the point of

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<sup>17</sup> Schechner, Richard op. cit. p-142

<sup>18</sup> Durkheim, Emile – The elementary forms of religious life, 1915, George Allen and Unwin Ltd. P-22

religion.<sup>19</sup> According to him, Sacred things are those which the interdictions (taboos) protect and isolate and Profane things are those to which these interdictions are applied and which must remain at a distance from the former. Religious beliefs are the representations, which express the nature of sacred things and the relations, which they sustain either with each other or with profane things. So, rites are the rules of conduct, which prescribe how a man should behave himself in the presence of these sacred objects.

Theatre comes into existence whenever a performer/performers arise(s) in a crowd and turn to address that crowd in artistic manner. This means there is a separation between audience and performers. Here the audience may or may not respond to the performance by attending. The audience is free to attend or stay away and if they stay away, it is the theatre that suffers, not its audience. Richard Schechner summarizes this difference between ritual and theatre as- ritual is an event upon which its participants depend and theatre is an event, which depends on its participants. But there can not be watertight compartmentalization between ritual and drama because new trends in theatre are making it difficult to categorize whether a performance is wholly a theatre or ritual. There is always transformation and osmosis of elements from ritual to theatre and vice-versa.

The distinction between ritual and theatre can be made more clear with the help of two mutually opposed concepts of efficacy and entertainment<sup>20</sup> which, though, form a binary system, a continuum. Efficacy of a performance means to work for achieving a determined result; a link to an absent other; abolishing of time and creating of symbolic time; bringing of 'other' here; possession of a performer in trance; participation by audience; belief of the audience on the performance itself; forbidding of criticism; and collective creativity. As opposed to this, entertainment yearns for fun; is meant only for those who are 'here'; emphasis 'now'; audience constitutes the 'other'; performer knows what he is doing instead of being in trance; audience watches and appreciates the performance; criticism is encouraged and is an individual creativity. So, it is advisable and practicable to start from the efficacy/entertainment binary to know the two forms of performances-ritual and theatre. Because the latter are the subset of the former. Ritual or theatre is not either fully efficacious or entertainment. A performance whether ritual or theatre is a braided structure of efficacy and entertainment. There is constant endeavour for theatre to be efficacious moving a little away from the entertainment. Procedures related to theatrical production such as the rehearsal and backstage activities; the workshops that lead up to the performance; the means by which audience is brought into the space and led from the space and

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<sup>19</sup> *ibid.* p-56

<sup>20</sup> Schechner, Richard *op. cit.* p-137

many other previously automated procedures, all manifest the efficacious nature of theatre. Again the theatrical performance allows the writer/director/performer to make a 'statement', to insert an ironic comment, to encourage the spectator to think about what he has seen and felt. This means the laughter (entertainment) created by theatre becomes a means to self contemplation (efficacy). This is a process of ritualization of theatre. Such ritual elements were very much present in ancient Indian theatre. A religious puja was a compulsory ingredient of every theatrical performance.<sup>21</sup> If it was skipped it meant trouble for the nation and the king and if it was performed it guaranteed the king's weal and luck to all men and women, young and old. This means the playhouse itself had a templar status and manifold sacral functions centred round the puja and drama. The *Natyasastra* indicates the sacralization of the performing space by the priest by installing statues of *Siva, Visnu, Narayana, Indra, Skanda, Sarasvati, Lakshmi, Agni, Yama, Mitra* and other gods round *Brahma*, in eight sectors oriented on and between the cardinal points. The movement is not one way only i.e.; from theatre to ritual. There is also move from ritual to theatre also.<sup>22</sup> It happens when a participating audience fragments into a collection of people who pay, who come because the show is advertised, who evaluate what they are going to see before they actually see it. This happens, oftenly, due to commercialization, when the ritual is taken out of its specified space of performance and is presented to a non-participating audience.

Efficacious performances can be witnessed in ritual performances of *Tsembaga, Arunta* and *Kurumugl* and various imitative rites around the world. These ecological rituals are performed to achieve some results such as a new high status, food, water, rain etc. These are achieved by appealing to a transcendent other who appears in person or by surrogate. Before we study examples of these rituals, it is deemed pertinent to clarify the binary concepts of 'transformation' and 'transportation'. This will enable us to see performances (both ritual and theatre) from the angle of both *efficacy/entertainment* and *transformation/transportation* binaries.

The 'transformation'<sup>23</sup> are those performances where the performers change their social statuses permanently. There is no coming back to the previous statuses. On the other hand 'transportation' are those performances in which the performers are 'taken somewhere' but at the end re-enter ordinary life. In such situations, the performer starts from the 'ordinary world' and enters into the 'performative world' i.e., from one time/space reference to another, from one personality reference to one or more others. It is the donning of another self or character. Here, he battles demons, goes into trance, travels to the sky or under the sea or earth. Acting, in most

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<sup>21</sup> Lidova, Natalia – *Drama and ritual of Early Hinduism*, 1994, Motilal Banarasidas Publishers Private Ltd., Delhi. P-99

<sup>22</sup> Schechner, Richard op. cit. p-154

<sup>23</sup> *ibid.* p-97

cases, is the art of temporary transformation. As the performer goes in, he also returns again to the ordinary life where he started when the performance is over. So, the performer is transported back to the pavilion. This return to the ordinary world is called '*cooling down*'. It is the effort of a performer to evade from the character he essays and to re-instate his self. He does this by changing dress, drinking wine or cold drink, smoking, talking to his friends and engaging in anything, which happens, in ordinary life. Sometimes it is harder to come out of the character than to get into it. For instance, in Bali, there are rituals for cooling down including sprinkling with holy water, inhalation of incense, massage, and even sacrifice of animals and blood sprinkling.

When performance is repeated time and again, there is a series of transportation, which leads to the transformation of the status of the performer. People begin to identify him as the character he plays. There are many examples of this permanent change. One of them is the case of the person who played *Narad-muni*<sup>24</sup> in the Ramlila in Ramnagar. During his thirty-five years of continuous playing of the role of Narad-muni (during 1960s and 80s), people started identifying him with the legendary semi divine sage. He was addressed as 'Narad' and not by his real name. Audience numbering around twenty five thousand listened devotedly to him as if the real Narad-muni was speaking. They believed that he had powers linking him to the sage/character he played. In real life, he practised priestcraft since he was also a Brahmin. He became the mahant-owner and chief priest of two temples in Mirzapur, a city about forty miles from Ramnagar. Such similar examples are still present in Indian film world too. *Arun Govil* as Rama and *Nitin Bhardwaj* as Krishna are two personalities who are much revered by most of the Indians who watch the epic television serials of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata respectively. Another example is that of *Quesalid*, a Kwakiutl who wanted to expose the quackery of the Shamans. After some time, Shamans accepted him as a member of their group. He was thoroughly trained in acting, magic and singing and other arts related to Shamanism. He mastered the art so well that he exposed other Shamans as quacks and in the process became a good shaman himself. People started believing in his curing power and he himself also began to believe in his mystical power. Now he is transformed into a good shaman. Levi-strauss says<sup>25</sup>: 'Quesalid did not become a great Shaman because he cured his patients; he cured his patients; because he had become a great Shaman.'

Transformation performances are clearly found in initiation rites whose purpose it is to transform people from one status or social identity to another. They are efficacious also because

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<sup>4</sup> *ibid.* p-94

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.* p-94



of this. An initiation not only marks a change but also is itself the means by which persons achieve their new selves. According to Durkheim,<sup>26</sup> initiation ceremony is the event to transform a *novice* into a man; a profane self into a sacred self. Once he is introduced to the sacred things, he starts transforming himself into the status of a sacred man by shedding the profane being he was. It is the rebirth of a new self. This initiation ceremony serves as a breaking agent in the continuity and separates profane from sacred. So, no performance, no change.

One transformation performance during initiation can be seen in Gahuku society of Papua New-Guinea.<sup>27</sup> When boys reach the stage of initiation, they are taken away from their village and secluded in the bush for several weeks and given initiatory ordeals like forced vomiting, nose-bleeding and trained in lore and dancing, by the elders. After two weeks they are brought back to their village by the men who trained them. When in the village, they are attacked by Gahuka women with stones and lethal pieces of wood, an occasional axe and even a few bows and arrows. Then the men pick up the boys and put them on their shoulders and run through no man's land. The whole drama is confined within the performative boundaries only. This involves 'twice behaved behaviours' i.e.; scored, expected and performed. Six weeks later when the training is completed, the final act is presented in the village. Now the women welcome them and the initiate dance as a group without the assistance or protection of the elders. Now the initiates have become Gahuka men with responsibilities and privileges of that status. This status is fundamentally social, public and objective. This entire ceremony incorporates both transformation and transportation. The initiates are transformed into men while the elders who trained them are transported. In the case of the latter, they enter into the performative world and perform with the initiates. When their work of assisting the initiates are accomplished, they are transported back to their previous status of elderly figures of the society.

Another example of ritual ceremony is the *Kaiko* celebration of the *Tsembaga* of Highlands New Guinea.<sup>28</sup> *Kaiko* means dancing and is a year long dance festival, which culminates in the *Konj-Kaiko-Pig Kaiko*. It brings together local alliances and is a further affirmation of their cooperation. During a *Kaiko* year nearly fourteen, fifteen dancing occasions can be held with neighbouring groups. The *Kaiko* festival is held once in twelve to fifteen years. Literally speaking, the dancing is about the food, for the whole *Kaiko* cycle is about acquiring enough Pigs-for-meat to afford the festival. The main purpose of the dance festival is the transaction of goods between the two groups. The hosts owe meat to the guests and the guests

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<sup>26</sup> Durkheim, E. op. cit. p-54

<sup>27</sup> Schechner, Richard op. cit. p-99

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.* p-124

owe items of trade to the hosts. But there is always imbalance in this transaction so that further Kaiko is expected between the two.

The performance is a transformation of destructive behaviour i.e; combat techniques (war) into constructive alliances i.e, entertainment. This can be seen when the guests come to the dancing ground shouting the long, low battle cry and stamp their feet as if in a real battlefield. The more splendid the display of dancing, the stronger the alliances, and the stronger the alliance the more splendid the dancing. The Kaiko entertainments are a ritual display, not simply a doing but a 'showing of a doing'. This showing is both actual i.e, exchange of goods leading to a new imbalance, and symbolic i.e, reaffirmation of alliances made concrete in the debtor (hosts)-creditor (guests) relationship. At the end of dancing, there is eating of meat. So, in artistic-religious terms, what starts as theatre ends as communion. These Kaiko dances are pivots in systems involving economic, social, political and religious transaction.

Another example of how a complicated series of performances expressed and participated in a people's ecology is the *Engwura cycle* of the *Arunta* of Australia.<sup>29</sup> The Engwura cycle is an initiation cycle that spans several years. This cycle has many phases. The last phase consists of performances staged sporadically over a three-to-four month period. Each phase takes place only when several conditions coincide-enough young men to be initiated, enough older men to lead the ceremonies, enough food to support the celebration. The whole cycle recapitulates the life cycle of the Arunta man and during his life, he could expect to play roles co-existent with his status in society i.e., initiate, participant, leader or onlooker. Each performance day sees several performances, not just one, which are divided by intermissions of two hours between two performances. On each such day, the performers enacted condensed and concentrated versions of their lives. The last phase of three-to-four months also replicates the life cycle. The subject matter of each brief dance-drama is life events of mythical dreamtime beings who populated the world in beginning. These performances involve history and geography since each dreamtime event is connected to specific places and landmarks. The rituals are a concrete symbolization of dreamtime events. This is a representation of the beliefs of the Arunta whose own lives are divided into 'ordinary' and 'superordinary' realities.

*Kurumugl*<sup>30</sup> in the Eastern Highlands of New Guinea also has an ecological ritual similar to Kanj Kaiko. The difference of this from Tsembaga ceremony is that the Kurumugl *sing-sing* (pidgin for drama-music-dance) brings together traditional enemies instead of traditional allies (in case of Tsembaga). The performances are always in danger of stepping over into actual combat.

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<sup>29</sup> *ibid.* p-128

<sup>30</sup> *ibid.* p-130

The main theme of the performance is the exchange of roles between hosts who are debtors and visitors who are creditors through 'payback' of meat (pork). The dance, which is held in the afternoon, is not a party but a ritual combat with the guests assaulting kurumugl in a modified war dance, armed with fighting spears and the Kurumugl dancers defending their ground and the piles of meat kept in the centre of it. There is dramatization of the actual battle scenes. Instead of secret raiding party, these are dancers, instead of taking human victims, they take meat, and instead of doubt about the outcome everyone knows what is going to happen. A dancer dresses up himself not for a dramatic role but for a social role. He is dressed up to actually display his strength, his power, his wealth and his authority. The performance itself focuses on actual economic, political and social power. In this performance, there is transformation of statuses i.e, the debtors (hosts) become creditors and the creditors (guests) become debtors.

In continuation of our tryst with the efficacious ritual performances, let us cite some of the imitative rites present among the Australian tribes. The Arunta tribe has a ritual ceremony called *Intichiuma*<sup>31</sup> which means 'to instruct' the young men the traditions of the tribe. The ceremony is led by the *Alatunja*, the chief of the totemic group. One such ceremony is that of the witchetty grup (a type of insect) clan. On the day of the ceremony all the male members of the totem assemble at a camp and proceed to the shrines of the totem naked, leaving some members back at the camp. They do not allow members of other totems to take part in this rite. The shrines have a big stone, which represents an adult witchetty grup and is surrounded by many small stones, which represent its eggs. By chanting hymns each and every member of the visiting team dust out the stones with sticks to replenish energy for more reproduction. After visiting around ten such shrines across the country the team comes back towards the camp. The second phase of performance is the imitative rite. When the team is about a mile away from the camp, the members adorn themselves ritually. While they were away an old man, left behind, built a shelter out of branches, called *Umbana*<sup>32</sup>, which represented the chrysalis out of which the insect comes. The members then move slowly and enter inside the *Umbana*. Then a chant arises from inside it, which describes the different phases through which the animal passes in the course of its development, and the myths of which the sacred rocks are the subjects. After the completion of this hymn, the *Alatunja* glides out of the hut still in squatting position, followed by other members. All of them reproduce the gestures of the movement of the insects. This is accompanied by a hymn, which is a commentary on the movements made by the insect. There are many such imitative rites present among different totemic groups of the Arunta tribe. For

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<sup>31</sup> Durkheim, E. op. cit. p-366

<sup>32</sup> *ibid.* p-394

instances, the Intichiumas of Emu totem, water totem, black cockatoo totem, rain, kangaroo etc. All these are performed in a dramatic manner imitating the various aspects of the object, which they want to arouse. This effort of bringing certain effect makes these rites efficacious. So, one example of braided structure of efficacy (ritual) and entertainment (theatre) is seen in these ceremonies.

The above mentioned examples are basically rituals because they tend more towards efficacy than towards entertainment. They also incorporate traces of entertainment and hence theatre. No performance is pure efficacy or pure entertainment. Whether one calls a specific performance ritual or theatre depends on the degree to which the performance tends towards efficacy or entertainment. In case of theatre, there is also transaction between spectators and the performers. The audience not only receives what the actors give but also gives something in return to the actors-laughter, tears, booing, and applause. In theatre there is construction of images so that what is intended to be shown to the audience is perfected through it. Such construction of images may be through actor's voice, his gesture, his appearance (mask, costume etc.), his instruments (properties, drums etc.) or through his acting place, his stage and his background (including his scenery). The ability to construct is exemplified in Ramnagar's Ramlila in an extraordinary manner.<sup>33</sup>

Transformation is the heart of theatre and there appear to be only two fundamental kinds of theatrical transformation<sup>34</sup> - (1) the transformation of anti-social, injurious, disruptive behaviour into ritualized and harmless gesture and display and (2) the invention of characters who act out fictional events or real events fictionalized by virtue of their being acted out. Though these transformations occur together there is always a dominant one in any performance. Western theatre emphasizes the second one and the Malenesians, African and Australian (aborigine) theatres emphasise the first one. But balance of the two tendencies can be found in *Kathakali*, *Noh of Japan*, *the Balinese theatre* etc. (which are studied in the next chapter).

Ritual and theatre are not polar apart. There is transformation from ritual to theatre and from theatre to ritual. The transformation from ritual to theatre takes place when the performance is taken out from its authentic place of performance to the stage. Such change can be seen in the performance of the famous dance of mudman of *Asaro* village (about 70 miles east of Kurumugl)<sup>35</sup> as a tourist entertainment. Economic constraints force Asors to bring this ritual performance of the stage.

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<sup>33</sup> This will be dealt in length in the next chapter i. e., Chapter-2

<sup>34</sup> Schechner, Richard (op. cit)

<sup>35</sup> *ibid.* p-143

Such changes in conventions, themes, methods and styles occur because of opportunism, audience pressure, professionalism and new technology. Tourism plays a vital role in these changes. It is a two way traffic-travelers bring back experiences, expectations and, if the tourists are practitioners of theatre, techniques, scenes and even entire forms. On the other hand, local culture gets influenced and changes are brought to suit the taste of the tourists. This is a survival tactic.

Theatre and ritual co-exist in a performance. As mentioned elsewhere, they form a braided structure. In history of Western theatre, when the braided structure is tight i.e., when both efficacy and entertainment are present in nearly equal degrees, theatre flourished. Especially in Western theatre, when efficacy dominates, performances are universalistic, allegorical, ritualized, tied to a stable established order. When entertainment dominates, the performances are class oriented, individualized, show business, constantly adjusted to suit the tastes of the audience. Ritual and theatre, each can not claim to be one another's source. At one moment ritual seems to be the source of theatre and at another point theatre seems to be the source of ritual. In fact, they are twin system vitally interconnected. There is osmosis between the two. Presently theatre is entering into the avenues, which were once solely occupied, by religion and politics. This is an improvement to broaden the horizon of theatre, which may incorporate anything from heaven to hell.

### **THE ACTOR AND ACTING**

Plays (both modern and traditional) are composed to be acted. This work of presenting the play to the audience is done by the actor. Actor is not only first in importance but also indispensable for theatre. Every play has the need for interpretative elements to bring its script to life and to present it to the audience for which it is intended. This responsibility is maintained by the actor. Whether the play be a dialogue in which the performers simply sit and talk, or a pantomime that depends entirely upon physical movement, it is the actor who is mainly responsible for conveying to the audience the dramatist's meaning. The business of the actor is to perform what is written by the dramatist; but it is also the business of the dramatist to write what can be acted.<sup>36</sup>

Success of a play is largely dependant upon the actors though there are many other elements, which help. A good play can be spoilt due to miscast or lack of skill on the part of the actors. Also a bad play may be lifted aloft with the skillful handling of the craft of theatre by the

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<sup>36</sup> Rice, Elmer (op. cit). p-245

actors. So, a dramatist is required to have the actors in mind when he writes a play. It includes how his play will look like when presented on the stage, how his expressions will be presented satisfactorily by the actors. This means a good dramatist is also required to be a good actor (or a director). It is not surprising that Shakespeare and Sophocles were actors themselves. One thing is certain: the actor can never be better than part he plays, for his function is to interpret the character that the dramatist has created. If he embroiders the part or gives it deeper meanings than the dramatist had conceived, then he is creating something new and, in effect, becomes a dramatist himself.

A fair amount of liberty is also made available to the actors too. A play is not bound to a fixed mode of presentation irrespective of who are playing it. An actor can use his personal skill and charm to bring out the character to his best. Otherwise the play or the character will be stereotyped and theatre lovers will begin to lose interest to see it time and again. A great play or character has a greater variety of interpretations. For instance, Hamlet is presented in different ways according to the conception of the director and the actors. Hamlet, the character in this play by the same name, is so complicated and no one actor could possibly realize everything that is implicit in the script. Therefore each actor is able to discover his own set of meanings and to give a more or less individualized characterization. Hamlet can be presented as a poet, a philosopher, a suicidal melancholic, a madman, a psychopath, a lover, a scheming politician, an incestuous-minded son, a modern swashbuckler, and even as a woman.<sup>37</sup> In plays (great plays), while the essential qualities of the plays are preserved, the relative values and emphases are substantially and interestingly altered. One basic rule of acting is that the actor must play the role determined by the playwright admirably. Selection of the role is not the business of the actor but of another's.

Theatre is the world of make-believe in which 'there' is materialized 'here' and 'then' is represented 'now' with the help of acting (both Vocal and Pantomimic). So, the actor needs something more than his/her physical characteristics. One actor can not play all the similar roles in diverse plays because he has a certain physical feature. For instance, an actor may not be fit to play the role of a dacoit in a new play though he may claim that he played one in so-and-so and in such-and-such. This is because the role of a dacoit portrayed by a certain dramatist is not necessarily similar to the one done by another dramatist. If it happens so, there is this phenomenon called 'type casting'.

Ideally, every part, no matter how small, should be played for everything that is in it. This implicitly means that any actor, whoever his status as an actor is, must not have any hesitation to

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<sup>37</sup> *ibid.* p-247

take the role, however small it is, if he suits it. Practically, it is not happening. Prominent actors usually feel that they suffer a loss of prestige by appearing in a minor part. Here the definition of who a great actor is becomes various. Someone may claim that a great actor does not see whether the role is small or big but gives her/his best to whatever role he is given. Others may stick to the idea that a great actor must be always in the lead role in a play befitting her/his status in the theatrical circuit.

Skakespeare might have said, a matter of fact, that every man and woman is a player. But when she/he is taken to the stage and is asked to act what she/he has been doing in day-to-day life, she/he will be stuck and will become self conscious and nervous. Acting, thus, is a severe discipline, that includes many skills: - diction, voice production, bodily grace, timing, teamwork, make-up, and characterization. The mastery of these skills is a long and costly process. This demands complete devotion from the actors. Learning of these skills may be through the regular performance or from formal training in schools in case of Kathakali, Noh etc. Training in schools is incomplete until and unless the actor is taken to the stage and made to face the audience. Like any art, the art of acting is encumbered with many traditions, many styles and many theories. But unlike the purely creative arts, its various manifestations directly affect the art of the drama. For instance, a play presented in a sing-song dialogue delivery technique will be quite different from the one, which is presented in a realistic dialogue delivery technique. Depending upon the different techniques of acting, there arises certain question. Should an actor completely submerge herself/himself in the part and seek only to project the dramatist's conception? Or should she/he attempt to enhance the vividness of the portrayal by injecting into it something of her/his own personality?<sup>38</sup> Both the dramatist and the drama student would be inclined to take the first view. But it has been witnessed that many successful actors add their individual charm or magnetism. They adapt every part they play to their unique personalities. For instance, *Naseerudin Shah* adds his personality to the role of Mahatma Gandhi when he plays this protagonist. Again, a merely 'technical' performance may be rigid and lacking in emotional colour while a certain amount of spontaneity can produce a sense of freshness that communicates itself to an audience.

In Indian theatre, specially the Sanskrit theatre, actor is known as *nata* and acting as *Abhinaya*.<sup>39</sup> But in *Natyasastra*, *Abhinaya* is something more than what we understand by acting. It includes other things, which go to make up the medium of expression. According to *Natyasastra*, *Abhinaya* is of four kinds – *angika*, *vacika*, *aharya*, and *sattvika*.

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<sup>38</sup> *ibid.* p-251

<sup>39</sup> Rangacharya, Adya – Introduction to Bharata's *Natyasastra*. 1966, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd. P-30

(1) *Angika*- It is derived, literally, from the word 'Anga' (body). It is the use of body to convey meaning through simple gestures, deliberate postures and artistic movements. Such bodily acting can be seen under three heads: (a) physical gestures (due to body or sarira) which are created by using six main limbs (anga) of the body, viz., hands, head, chest, sides (or hips), waist and feet. (b) facial expressions (from different parts of the face) which are visible through six facial parts (*Upanga*), viz., eyes, eyebrows, nose, lips, cheeks and chin. (c) Postures or movements. Pose is called *cari* and this brings in a line waist, hips, thighs and feet. A *cari* is not a movement and also not a gesture, which comes naturally like nodding the head. It is a deliberate stance. Then movement in *Natyasastra* is called *Mandala*, which results from a number of caris. In representing fights, battles and such incidents involving movements mandalas are to be employed, if necessary to the accompaniment of musical instruments. The most important among the above three is the facial (*Upanga*) expressions. Bodily gestures and pose or movements etc. if unaccompanied by facial expressions do not convey any charm or attraction. On the other hand, physical gestures even if inadequate, will be twice effective if accompanied by facial expression. There are many modes of bodily, facial and postural expressions but there is no hard and fast rule that an actor must adhere to certain expression. The presentation of an emotional theme is dependant upon the actor's individual skill.

(2) *Vacika*- Literally it means belonging to speech. It is widely concerned with voice control and not just speaking or language. What is relevant under this heading is the dramatic speech, which is neither poetry, nor prose nor follows the rules of grammar. This drama speech language is classified into four varieties depending upon the social standing of the character and the place to which that character belongs. They are –

(a) *Atibhasa*, the grandiloquent language of gods and supermen, (b) *Aryabhasa*, the refined speech of kings (and aristocracy), (c) *Jatibhasa*, the mother tongue of ordinary individuals and (d) *Mleschabhasa*, the corrupt language of the foreigners (and the low born). In addition to these four main languages there could be the language of birds and beasts (i.e., imitation of sounds emitted by them). Apart from such use of languages, there is the various use of intonation in the dramatic speech. Such intonation can be used in the drama when a character speaks to a person who is not on the stage. A particular emotion can be created by using a suitable intonation. Even a pause in the speech would be significant in a dramatic speech.

(3) *Aharya*- It is the kind of *Abhinaya*, which is produced through *nepathya*. The word *nepathya* connotes many things associated with the decoration of an actor, such as painting and other make-up like beard and moustache as well as costumes and ornaments etc. Bharata explains



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nepathya as of four kinds.<sup>40</sup> They are: - (a) *Pusta*- things like mountains or chariots, masks, weapons, totems etc. that are made from cloth or leather, etc. for the use in a play. (b) *alamkar*- garlands, necklaces, ornaments worn on different parts of the body and dress. They are worn not to make the characters look beautiful or attractive but look genuine in the context of the story and play. (c) *angaracana*- painting the face and body. It is done to hide the previous personality of an actor and also to fashion the look of the character she/he is playing. For instance the southerners should be made up as 'non-white' (*asita*), the easterners as 'darkish' (*sama*) and the northerners as 'white' (*gowre*); a forester as black and so on. (d) *sanjiva* – entry of animals, bipeds and quadrupeds and those without feet, on the stage.

(4) *Sattvika* (Also known as *Samanya*)- It comes from the word *sattva* meaning grace or charm. *Sattvika abhinaya* is the expression in a graceful or charming manner the various *bhavas* (moods). Grace or charm excludes improper behaviours, looks, gestures and movements. So, kissing, embracing, sleeping etc. are ungraceful and must not be shown on the stage. This does not mean that love scenes or battle scenes are to be avoided. It is only that they must be presented with grace, charm and propriety. The *sattva* comes both in speaking and gestures and movements. This means there is stylization of acting to suit the character. Such is mostly discussed in plays dealing with a love story. The reason is obvious. It is here that propriety and decency are likely to be disturbed the most.

Despite these above four kinds, of acting, Bharata finally leaves it to the talent of actors and confesses<sup>41</sup>, "it is not possible to form rules (or give directions) for acting or conveying the (unbelievable) various actions and objects of the world." This means the communication of a play is dependant upon actors and the effectiveness of communication may be greatly enhanced by the ability and insight of the performers or greatly diminished by their incompetence and stupidity. A great play comes up when there is exact combination between the character created by the dramatist and the playing of it by the actor.

### **MASK, MAKE-UP AND COSTUME**

An actor in a theatrical performance is exposed to two kinds of resources, which he can use to enhance the effect of performance. He/she has his/her personal resources such as his voice, his gesture, his appearance (mask, make-up, costume) and his instruments (properties, drums etc.). He also has his external or secondary resources such as his 'place' (the place where he acts),

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<sup>40</sup> *ibid.* p-35

<sup>41</sup> *ibid.* p-41

his stage, his props (background scenery, light, table, chair etc.). Though a modern production may need many complex techniques and elaborate props, the zenith of theatre can be reached sheerly with the help of the actor's personal resources. The wise use of the actor's voice and gestures creates the unimaginable things. This has been dealt in length before. So, we are, here, left to study the appearance of the actor i.e., mask, make-up and costume.

Mask is one of the most powerful elements of theatrical technique. It does two things to the performer.<sup>42</sup> Firstly, it takes away the person we know. It can even take away humanity. Secondly, it invests the wearer with something we do not know but which is awful and non-human, a god or a devil. The mask also rehabilitates the player's face. The first kind can be seen in the Bavarian wild men, the Padstow horse, Barong play of Bali etc. The second kind can be discerned in Chho dance, the Tibetan Festival drama, Noh theatre etc. (These above forms of traditional theatres will be dealt in length in the next chapter.) In all these examples it is the assumption of something beyond the human individual, be it animal or god or demon. Using of mask is completely theatrical. As theatre needs the actor to take somebody else's role other than himself, mask provides the opportunity to completely metamorphose himself to the role he enacts.

The next in the line with the mask and a near substitute to the mask is make-up. Make-up also does the job, which the mask does, but not exactly like the mask. It enhances the facial appearance making it innocent, fearsome, erotic, benevolent etc. It can even depersonalize the actor. For instance, Chinese theatre uses greasepaint to depersonalize the performer and to suit the role. One of the most complex forms of make-up can be seen in Kathakali dance drama of Kerala. Its intricate use of colour to express different forms of character is awe inspiring (this will be studied in the next chapter.)

The mask and make-up can not make a person completely an animal, god or demon. The player in mask and make-up may be partially betrayed, most obviously by his hands, next by his feet, next by his arms and legs and last by his trunk. These at least are human and familiar. Now, let the hands be gloved, the feet shod, the arms and legs clad and body invested and we have a complete concealment of the world and a complete revelation of non-human both animal and supernatural. Here comes the work of costume. The importance of costume in theatrical performance will be seen in the traditional costumed plays. In Sanskrit theatre the make-up and costume are talked of as part of *Aharya abhinaya* as discussed before. A player with mask make-up and costume can go all the way. There is no height to which he can not reach. The most

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<sup>42</sup> Southern, Richard op. cit. p-29

developed drama of a civilization is within his touch. He can appeal even to the sophisticated playgoers of the modern world.

### **THE DIRECTOR**

The director of a play is an invisible man who makes the play presentable to the audience. Many people in the audience are unaware of him though they are well aware of the actors. They, even, are not conscious of the fact that the play is directed at all. This may, at first sight, seem to be a very disappointing gesture but it is in fact a positive sign for the director. This is because, the director is able to create a play which is very realistic and natural that the audience feels that it is not directed at all. In a well directed play, the movement is so easy and graceful, the flow of words so smooth and natural, that it all seems to be something that is happening spontaneously, instead of the precise execution of a carefully conceived and minutely detailed pattern.<sup>43</sup>

The director is nearly indispensable as the actor for the production of a play. It is almost impossible to imagine a company of actors preparing a play for performance without the guidance of a director. They would not know what to do, where to go, how to speak their lines and productions would be a hopeless muddle, completely lacking in form and in cohesion. So a director studies the play, instructs and guides the actors to make the play visible and successful. He is the captain of the whole production under whom every actor performs his/her role. He is also like a coach of a football team who guides his player to capitalize on the right moves. He is the one who saves a production from a chaos. He has been present, though shadowy behind the scene since time immemorial. The old Sanskrit theatre addresses him as acarya who is responsible for selecting the able actors and directing them for the plays.

There are two important preliminary works for the director before the actual direction starts. First one is the casting of the play. It is a meticulous work in which the director tries to relate the candidates' personality and ability to the part he/she is required to play. Familiarity with the actors past performance is helpful but it is not an assurance for good performance in future. In casting of a play, the director must do more than select a suitable actor for each part, he must also consider the parts in relation to each other and assemble a company that plays in the same key and seems to belong in the same milieu. It is because; all the best actor may not give a good

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<sup>43</sup> Rice, Elmer op. cit. p-255

production if they are engaged in outshining one another in their individual ways. Theatre as mentioned elsewhere is a group work.

The second preliminary work for the director is to familiarize himself/herself with the physical layout of the scenes in which the action is to take place. He/she needs to know whether setting is done properly, that sight lines are unobstructed, that means of access are advantageously placed, that furniture and properties can be arranged so that they can be most effectively used, and that a dozen other physical and technical details have been properly organized. When the director has got all this knowledge he/she can use it as a basis for his/her pattern of the stage movement.

Following the various methods in staging a play, the director can be grouped into three categories<sup>44</sup> *Author's directors, actor's director, and director's directors*. The author's director tends to use the actors as instruments to bring out the values of the play script. He is more concerned to stay within the bounds of the character the dramatist has created. This does not mean that actors are subordinated to the script but that they are used to make the characters played out to the utmost satisfaction. If the play is good, the actor has artistic integrity as well as skill and director knows his business, this type of production can be deeply convincing and aesthetically satisfying.

*Actor's director* tends to treat the script as material to be used by the actors for the display of their talents. He studies each character from the point of histrionic opportunities it offers. Main emphasis is given on what the actors should be doing rather than upon the progression of the plot. This method works very well when the play is weak and actors are good, as the deficiencies of the script are concealed by the skillful performance of the actors. A prominent actor can be tested in such plays. The actor's director also tends to span a great deal of time giving technical instruction to the actors. Such indulgence is avoided by the author's director as he feels that it is not his duty to teach acting.

*Director's director* employs both scripts and actors for the exhibition of his mastery of the tricks of stage craft. He is largely regarded as 'showman' for his love for producing sensational effects by the use of any device that comes to hand or that he can invent. Here the attention is diverted from the play and the actors and is given on the maximum use of scenery, lights, costumes, eccentric staging, photographic literalism etc. This is an attempt to create an illusion to the audience. Here, the production is more popular than the play itself. So, one sees not somebody's play but so-and-so's production of somebody's play. Such production may give instant pleasure but it lacks substance.

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<sup>44</sup> *ibid*, p-257

It is matter of fact that every director can not be labeled as solely belonging, exclusively to only one of the above categories. There is intermixing of them in a good director. Basically, the duty of a director is to translate the play script into terms of acting and stage mechanics. This means a light scene should be created so as to arouse laughter and serious scene to arouse tensions. Apart from mastering the stage craftsmanship a director must also understand off stage relationship among the actors and between him and actors etc. He must be something of a psychologist. His relationship to the actors is a quasi-parental one. He is responsible for maintaining the backstage morale also to bring out a well coherent production. The audience may not give such importance to this captain of the ship but he is the reigning king during the crucial production period.

### THE AUDIENCE

According to Richard Southern<sup>45</sup>, the essence of theatre lies in the impact made by a performance on an audience. If the emotional arousal among the audience is lacking in that performance then it is not successful in its enactment of the play. Success and failure of a play is dependant upon the reaction by the audience. So, it there can be no drama without theatre, and then certainly there can be no theatre without an audience.<sup>46</sup>

An audience in a theatrical performance is what Erving Goffman has called a “*focused gathering*” – a set of persons engrossed in a common flow of activity and relating to one another in terms of that flow.<sup>47</sup> Such gathering meet and disperse; the participants in them also fluctuate. They are drawn, for the most part, to the theatre by nothing stronger than a desire for entertainment. In a conventional performance in a theatre, all the members of an audience, nearly strangers to one another, are linked to each other by momentary similarity of purpose and willingness to submit to immobile captivity of some hours inside the auditorium. This audience is almost certainly heterogeneous as its members vary in age, occupation, religion, race, education, intelligence and taste. They meet accidentally but for a similar purpose.

An outstanding example of ‘focused gathering’ is the one found in the *Balinese cock fight*<sup>48</sup>. Strangely enough, the performers in this performance are not human beings but ‘cocks’ which are a symbol of masculinity in the Balinese society. This performance is a real one in

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<sup>45</sup> Southern, Richard op. cit. p-20

<sup>46</sup> Rice, Elmer op. cit. p-275

<sup>47</sup> Goffman, Erving – Encounters:- Two Studies in the Sociology of interaction, 1961, IndianaPolis. pp. 9-10

<sup>48</sup> Geertz, Clifford - The Interpretation of Cultures, Selected essays, 1973, Basic Books, Inc., Publishers, New York. Chapter-15 pp. 412-453

which the cocks are not trying to give an illusion to the spectators. The cock fights a real battle, kills its opponent or is killed in the process but leaves behind the theatrical entertainment to the spectators. Geertz<sup>49</sup> says .....,

*“ Surrounding all these melodrama---which the crowd packed tight around the ring follows in near silence, moving their bodies in kinesthetic sympathy with the movement of the animals, cheering their champions on with wordless hand motions, shifting of the shoulders, turnings of the head, falling back en masse as the cock with the murderous spurs careens towards one side of the ring ( it is said that spectators sometimes lose eyes and fingers from being too attentive), surging forward again as they glance off toward another ---is a vast body of extraordinarily elaborate and precisely detailed rules.”* Though there can be frenzy amongst the audience, there is hardly any altercation between the two groups supporting the two fighting cocks.

Once the spectators are inside the theatre or at the performing place, a convention befitting of a public place, automatically starts generating among them. The gathering takes on an identity and character of its own, which is not wholly like that of any of its component members. This could be an example of Durkheim’s idea of “social” being more than “individual”. The audience will react sharply, in unison, to the use of languages, which are meant for private conversation only. Again, the moral judgments and intellectual concepts of the audience are likely to vary greatly from those of its individual members. So, patriotic, pious and moral platitudes and clichés are often greeted in the theatre with approval and even applause by persons who would reject them in cold type or in private conversation.<sup>50</sup>

The task of a performance is to create an illusion of reality so strong that it will enable the audience to identify itself in some way with the characters and to share their joys, sorrows and perplexities. The audience is unable to come out of this realm of illusion even if it knows that most of the things shown are only pretence. For instance, the gun used in a play is actually made of plastic, the dead hero will get up once the curtain comes down. Judging from these the whole business of the theatre seems ridiculous. But it is not so as the audience is too glad to give itself up to the enjoyment of what it knows to be only illusion. The enjoyment the spectators have is real and it is the most important thing for which they come to see the performance.

There is swinging moods of the audience in accordance with continuity of the performance. Smiles, tears, clenched hands, wide eyes all reflect the changing moods. The reflection of the performance is imaged on the audience itself. Studying of the audience

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<sup>49</sup> *ibid.* p-423

<sup>50</sup> Rice, Elmer *op. cit.* p-270

behaviour will indicate whether the performance is able to communicate well with the audience. As long as the audience is glued to the show, it is a positive sign for the performance. If there are coughs, yawns and restless squirming, one may be certain that the interest is slackening and contact between the performer and audience is somehow broken. Until and unless the performers keep the audience interested, there can be any kind of disturbance from the side of the latter. The disturbances may be in the form of an explosive sneeze, an ill-timed guffaw, a drunken altercation, loud conversation and above all leaving the performing place. The players are vulnerable to such dangers. They are vulnerable to the invasion of the performing space by the audience. It seems that they are at the mercy of the audience. This is more so in the traditional outdoor theatres such as the British Mummers' play, the Tibetan festival drama, the Medieval Rounds and the Shumang lila.<sup>51</sup>

There can be a serious sociological study of audience structure. Apart from difference in age, sex, race, religion, intelligence, taste etc. the members of an audience can be differentiated on the basis of social status. In some theatres such as the Tibetan festival drama, the medieval rounds, the kathakali, the Noh and the Ramlila at Ramnagar, certain area is reserved for the people of ranks such as kings, nobles, and chiefs, government officials, respected elders etc. This special place may be *tents* (in case of the Tibetan festival drama), *scaffolds* (in case of the medieval rounds), *the space closest to the performing area* (in case of the kathakali), *raised boxes* (in case of the Noh), *elephant's back* (in case of the Ramlila at Ramnagar) etc. In other theatres there is no such compartmentalization. Literally anybody can come and watch and enjoy the performance without any hindrance (though buying tickets is compulsory in some cases). There is free mixing of spectators irrespective of one's social status. They occupy the place on first-come-first-serve basis. Such structure is found in Shumang Lila, the British Mummer's play, the Chho etc. Apart from such stratification, there can be stratification of theatres based on the type of audience they attract. There are theatres meant for the mass and there are also theatre meant for the class. This way audience behaviour also differs. The audience constituted by the mass may have lesser limitation and more liberty to react to the performances, to move around, to converse etc. This is quite evident in traditional folk theatre such as Shumang Lila. On the other hand the behaviour of the audience constituted by 'class' is restrained. Such is found in most of the modern theatres. But this does not mean that the audience of the modern theatre is more intelligent or decent than the audience of the folk theatres. It is just the pervasiveness of the environment, which drives the audience to certain behaviour.

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<sup>51</sup> The emotionally charged audience often intrudes the space of the performers which is controlled by the organisers of the play. This audience behaviour will be dealt with in the next chapter.

In the theatre what is important is not the expression but the communication.<sup>52</sup> The dramatist may express his views and then this expression is put into action by the actors. Still, the actor has not accomplished his/her work. He is not successful until and unless his expression is able to communicate the message to the audience. Whether his message has been communicated properly or not can be easily seen on the faces of the spectators. This is because the audience is not a mere passive recipient. So, the essence of theatre lies here.

We have discussed some of the most important ingredients of a successful production of a theatrical performance. Now, let us try to incorporate them in the study of a society. This can be done through three main approaches- (1) *Social dramas of Victor Turner*, (2) *Role theory* and (3) *Dramaturgical approach of Erving Goffman*.

### SOCIAL DRAMA

Social drama is a metaphor<sup>53</sup> of conflict, change and growth. This application of 'drama' as metaphor, on the social process is well explained by Victor Turner in his book-*Dramas, Fields and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (1975).<sup>54</sup> This concept carries the idea that human social life is the producer and the product of time, which becomes its measure. It is also implicit in this that the social world is a 'becoming' not a world in 'being'<sup>55</sup> (when "being" is a description of the static, a temporal model). It is against Comte's idea of "Social Statics", as there is no such thing as "static action". It is self-contradictory. Such a view violates the actual flux and changefulness of the human social scene.

Turner sees this metaphor of social drama as a human aesthetic form, a product of culture not of nature. He employs here, the Znaniecki's concepts of cultural and natural systems. According to the latter, Natural systems are objectively given and exist independently of the experience and activity of men. Cultural systems, on the contrary, depend not only for their meaning but also for their existence upon the participation of conscious, volitional human agents and upon men's continuing and potentially changing relations with one another. Znaniecki called this participation of human agents as "humanistic coefficient". Turner uses this concept in analyzing social dramas.

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<sup>52</sup> Rice, Elmer. Op. cit. p-2

<sup>53</sup> Metaphor is a way of proceeding from the known to the unknown. It is our means of effecting instantaneous fusion of two separated realms of experience into one illuminating, iconic and encapsulating image.

<sup>54</sup> Turner, Victor – *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors : Symbolic Action in Human Society*, 1975, Cornell University Press, London. Chapter-1

<sup>55</sup> *ibid.* p-24



Social drama<sup>56</sup> is the conflict manifested in public episodes of tensional irruption between persons or groups within the same system of social relations, be it a village, chiefdom, office, factory, political party or Ward, church, university department, or any other set or field of social interaction (It may also take place between two different systems of social relations e.g. between two communities, countries etc.). Social dramas take place in “aharmonic” phases of the ongoing social process. They happen when the interests and attitudes of groups and individuals stood in obvious opposition. Social drama is a part of processual unit (which also includes harmonic process such as social enterprise). Turner’s interest in social dramas follows his studying of *Ndembu* social life, in villages, which has a propensity towards conflict. But he is sure that they can be applied to societies at all levels of scale and complexity. Here he brings in Freud’s view that disturbances of the normal and regular often give us greater insight into the normal than does direct study. Deep structure may be revealed through surface anti-structure or counter-structure. Conflict seems to bring fundamental aspects of society, normally overlaid by the customs and habits of daily intercourse, into frightening prominence. People have to take sides in terms of deeply entrenched moral imperatives and constraints, often against their own personal performances. Duty counts more than one’s choice.

Social drama, since it is a processual unit, represents sequences of social events, which constitute a temporal structure. This temporal structure is organized primarily through relations in time rather than in space. This indicates that social dramas are the result of numerous previous events, which engaged the two conflicting groups or persons. It is a diachronic profile of the social drama. This processual approach is decisive as a guide to the understanding of human social behaviour. Societies never stops moving and there are goals to be achieved. This endeavour brings in conflict, opposition and then also harmony among the groups or individuals.

Social dramas are units of aharmonic or disharmonic process – arising in conflict situations. Turner enumerates four<sup>57</sup> main phases of social drama, which are accessible to observation. These are: -

(1) *Breach*: – It is the flaunting of regular norm governed social relations and occurs between persons or groups within the same system of social relations, be it a village, chiefdom, office, factory, political party or ward, church, university department or any other system or set or field of social interaction. This is the public or deliberate non fulfillment of crucial norms regulating the entercourse of the parties. It is an obvious symbol of dissidence but not a crime though it resembles one: While crime is egoistic, breach has an altruistic aspect. A person or a

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<sup>56</sup> *ibid.* p-33

<sup>57</sup> *ibid.* p-38

section of a group breaches the norm as a protest on behalf of the group. The breaching party sees itself as representative of the group whether the latter is aware of it or not.

(2) *Crisis*: - This is a phase of mounting crisis. If the breach is not contained within a limited time, it may take the form of crisis between the two antagonistic parties. More conventionally this is termed as '*escalation*' of crisis. This may also happen between two enemy countries or between two ideologically contradictory blocs (say between communists and capitalist camps). Among the Ndembu, this phase exposes the pattern of current factional intrigue, which till then covert, within the relevant social group, village, neighbourhood or chiefdom. This also makes visible the basic Ndembu social structure made up of relations that have a high degree of constancy and consistency. This phase is one of those turning point or moments of danger and suspense, when a true state of affairs is revealed and when it is least easy to pretend that nothing is wrong between the factional groups.

(3) *Redressive* :- It is a mechanism (a metaphor borrowed from physics) to limit or to scale down the spread of crisis. This can be informal or formal, institutionalized or ad hoc and is swiftly brought into operation by leading or structurally representative members of the disturbed social system. The mechanisms vary in type and complexity depending upon the degree of seriousness of the breach and then crisis. They may range from personal advice and informal mediation or arbitration to formal juridical and legal machinery, and to resolve certain kinds of crisis or legitimate other modes of resolution, to the performance of public ritual. The notion of '*escalation*' can also be applied to this phase also like in second phase. This happens when the crisis not solved in a lower court and is dragged further to higher court (even supreme court). This redressive phase of social dramas is very important in studying social change. It is the taste of the strength of a social system. It is here that both pragmatic techniques and symbolic action reach their fullest expression. It is important to see whether these techniques and actions are able to handle the crisis so as to restore the status quo ante or to restore peace among the contending groups. When this redressive action fails, there is usually regression to crisis. At this point direct force may be used, in the varied forms of war, revolution, intermittent acts of violence, repression or revelation. The breaking out of fresh violence after the failure of negotiations can be witnessed in many parts of the world in the present world. For example, in Sri Lanka, Kashmir, North-East India, Northern Ireland etc.

(4) *Reintegration*: - this phase consists either of the reintegration of the disturbed social group or of the social recognition and legitimization of irreparable schism between the contesting parties. The former can be seen, at the level of countries, in the reintegration of East and West Germany. The latter can be discerned in the recognition of independence of East Timor from

Indonesia recently. In the case of the Ndembu, this latter way often means the secession of one section of the village from the rest. Several years after this event, seceded group organizes a major ritual and the members of the other are expressly invited, thus registering reconciliation at a different level of political integration.

These phases, of social drama, almost all the phases, can be seen among the *Nuer* reported by Evans Pritchard<sup>58</sup> (1956). The reported social drama happened between two neighbouring villages. The breach was created when a youth of a village (where Pritchard stayed) was wounded in the shoulder by a spear in a fight with a man of the next village. That was a breach because the two villages were in friendly relationship. In order to prevent the breach from becoming a crisis, redressive action was taken up immediately by the members of the village of the attacker. The attacker's kinsmen at once sent the spears with which the wound had been inflicted to the injured youth's home with expression of regret and wishes for a speedy recovery. This was accepted by the wounded man's kinsmen. Next morning a delegation came from the wounder's village with a goat for sacrifice. This was a gesture to pay compensation in order to avoid any blood feud. It is a belief that the sacrifice of the goat will obviate the danger of death of the wounded youth.

The regressive action comes in the form of a ritual ceremony. This ritual ceremony was officiated by a *leopard-skin priest* and also a prophet, who also served as a mediator between the two groups. His pressure gave greater importance and therefore perhaps efficacy, to the ceremony. He gave an invocation to god (*Kwoth*) to prevent the youth from dying and for peaceful coexistence between the two groups. He then sacrificed the goat, which was consecrated by rubbing ashes on its back, at the end of his speech. Then the home party brought forward a wether (a sheep) for sacrifice. Two representatives from the home party addressed an invocation that the wound happened accidentally and there was no enmity between them and to take the sheep and restore health to the wounded youth. Then a representative of the visitors spoke some words on the same vein as above and the sheep was sacrificed. The reintegration of the two groups was brought about by these sacrifices. The sacrificed animals were eaten by the home party after the visitors left the village. This is a perfect example of restoring the status quo ante between the two parties, which otherwise would lead to an ugly turn of event.

In keeping with the comparison of the temporal structure of certain types of social processes with that of dramas on the stage, with their acts and scenes, Turner sees the phases of social dramas as cumulating to a climax. This climax may be a solution or outcome.

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<sup>58</sup> Pritchard, Evans – *Nuer Religion*, 1956, Oxford University Press. P-107

## ROLE THEORY

How does participation in the structure of society shape individual conduct and vice-versa? This is one question, which led to the sociological enquiry on the concept of role. Individuals are seen as playing roles associated with positions in larger networks of positions. This enquiry into the social structure and the role of individuals in the structure intensified during the 1920s and 1930s. This became a distinct approach and was known as role theory.

The concept of role is very ambiguous and it is difficult to take a single line to study it. According to Jonathan H. Turner (1987)<sup>59</sup>, there is a structural approach to roles at one extreme and a more processual strategy at the other. There is a range of approaches within interactionism in general which constitutes a continuum. One pole of this continuum is occupied by '*play*' where individuals are seen as players in the theatre, while the other end is occupied by '*game*' where players are considered to be participants in a pick-up game. When human action is seen as occurring in a theatre, interaction is likely to be viewed as highly structured by the script, directors, other actors, and the audience. When conceptualized as a game, interaction is more likely to be seen as less structured and as influenced by the wide range of tactics available to participants.

Let us delve into the structural role perspective first. This is the perspective seen in the works of Robert Park, Jacob Moreno, Ralph Linton, Georg Simmel and George Herbert Mead. The general outline of the social world given by these theorists can be discerned in Shakespeare's passage –

“ All the world's a stage....

And one man in his time plays many parts.”

This perspective studies the natures of social organization and individual and then sees how there is articulation between the two. This sees social world as a network of variously interrelated positions, or statuses, within which individuals enact roles. Each position carries expectations about how incumbents are to behave. Thus social organization is ultimately composed of various networks of statuses and expectations.<sup>60</sup>

Expectations associated with the statuses are diverse. Pursuing the dramaturgical analogy these can be grouped into three classes. They are – (a) expectations from the 'script'; (b) expectations from other 'plays'; and (c) expectations from the audience. First one regards the

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<sup>59</sup> Turner, Jonathan H. – the Structure of Sociological theory, 1987, Rawat Publications. Pp. 353-354

<sup>60</sup> *ibid.* p-355

social reality as script. Positions are guided by the norms so that the individuals in these positions behave accordingly. Norms governing the positions vary. Like the script demands the actors to enact the roles they have been given, the social norms also expect the individuals to adhere to the suitable behaviour of positions they hold. The second expectation includes demands emitted by other players in an interaction situation. It can be conceived in terms of role taking of others' gestures by the concerned individual. The third one involves audiences, real, imagined, an actual group or a social category. These groups guide the conduct of the actors. They comprise a frame of reference, or reference group, that circumscribes the behaviour of actors in various statuses. So, the social world is organized in terms of expectations from above variety of sources.

The structural role theory generally conceptualizes the individual in terms of two basic attributes – (a) self-related characteristics and (b) role playing skills and capacities. The first attribute is about how the self-conception of an individual helps in the interpretation of expectations from others in connection to his status. The second attribute denotes those capacities of individuals to perceive various types of expectations and then, with varying degrees of competence and with different role playing styles, to follow a selected set of expectations. The two attributes are interrelated in the sense that the former mediates the way the roles are enacted and the latter helps in constructing a stable self-conception.

Another set of assumption regarding the individual gives more emphasis on the individual's conformity to the norms governing his status. The degree and form of conformity are usually seemed as the result of a variety of internal processes operating on individuals. These internal process are conceptualized in terms of four variables<sup>61</sup> such as – (1) the degree to which expectations have been internalized as a part of an individual's need structure, (2) the extent to which negative or positive sanctions are perceived by the individual to accompany a particular set of expectations, (3) the degree to which expectations are used as a yardstick for self evaluation, and (4) the extent to which expectations represent either interpretations of others' actual responses or merely anticipations of their potential responses. The structural role theory does not regard individual as a creative role entrepreneur who is working to change the social structure but sees him as a pragmatic performer who attempts to meet the expectations inhering in social structure.

There is always a meeting point between individual and society. The concept of role itself clearly indicates that the statuses are occupied by the individuals and they fulfill the duties, which are expected from them as incumbents of the statuses. The structural role theory further sees this articulation between individual and society through three alternative conceptualizations of roles,

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<sup>61</sup> *ibid.* p-358

depending upon which component of role is emphasized. *Firstly*, prescribed roles give emphasis on the expectations on individuals to adhere to certain prescriptions. So, there is stress on the conformity to the demands of a particular status. *Secondly*, subjective roles give emphasis on self's ability to interpret the expectations. The social world is seen as structured in terms of individual's subjective assessments of the interaction situation. Lastly, enacted roles give emphasis on the overt behaviour of the individual. The above two components i.e., expectations and subjective assessment of expectations are made visible by this enacted role. This way the social world can be seen as a network of interrelated behaviours. Practically, these three conceptual notions can not exist separately. It is because, overt behaviour obviously involves a subjective assessment of various types of expectations. In fact there is a complex causal relationship among these components of role.

The above studied structural role theory has certain weak points which are identified and renewed by another approach which gives more emphasis on the processual nature of role. This approach is the brainchild of Ralph H. Turner. According to him<sup>62</sup> the structural approach gives an overly structured vision of the social world, with its emphasis on norms, status positions and the enactment of normative expectations. He further says that most roles do not adhere to given structures. This sticking to the structure gives an image that roles are not free to venture out of the structure. The fact is that the individuals are more adventurous than what the structural role theory tells.

The processual approach regards that people negotiate their respective roles instead of just conforming to some normative expectations. Roles are not inventories of specific behaviours, which an individual has to strictly follow. People only take general attitudes, styles and loosely defined behavioural options associated with a role. Rest depends on the individual. Individuals, in an interaction situation, negotiate roles and constantly make roles for themselves. So this approach gives priority to the process of interaction over the dictates of social structures.

Turner borrows Mead's concept of role taking and stresses that the actors emit gestures or cues--words, bodily countenance, voice inflections, dress, facial expressions and other gestures – as they interact. He further goes one step above Mead and says that role taking gives way to role making. This role making is done within a cultural framework where individuals make their own roles to suit the situation. This gives a folk assumption that people around an individual are playing identifiable roles. In his approach, Turner gives an interactionist aspect that people in an interaction situation follow a convention. If the individuals do not have an implicit “norm of

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<sup>62</sup> *ibid.* Chapter-17. pp. 369-388

consistency”, the interaction becomes difficult. There is always communication of gestures or cues to harmonize the situation.

Turner in his approach retains the emphasis on the behavioural aspect of role. The notion that roles are conceptions of expected behaviours is also preserved, for the assignment of a role to a person invokes an expectation that a certain type and range of responses will ensue. The view that roles are the norms attendant on status positions is given less emphasis but not ignored. And the conception of roles as parts that people learn to play is preserved, for people, are able to denote each other’s roles by virtue of their prior socialization into a common role repertoire.

### **DRAMATURGICAL APPROACH OF ERVING GOFFMAN**

Erving Goffman is the most prominent sociologist who extensively employs dramaturgy as a metaphor to study the social interaction in everyday life. His dramaturgical approach can be discerned in his book--Presentation of self in Everyday life (1959)<sup>63</sup>. The substance of all the works of Goffman is the close analysis of the ‘interaction order’ – that part of social life that occurs whenever ‘two or more individuals are in one another’s response presence’.<sup>64</sup> He aims to discover the structures and processes (the forms) exhibited in face-to-face interaction as well as the sources of its orderliness. This face-to-face interaction is governed by a common set of rules and obligations and also a common tacit knowledge of how to construct and recognize a range of social actions. These rules, obligations and tacit knowledge both enable and constrain what individuals can accomplish in the course of such interaction. This general approach is imbedded in any of Goffman’s analysis.

Before we examine Goffman’s dramaturgical analysis of self in day-to-day social interaction, it is pertinent to understand how he perceives ‘self’ to be. His concept of self is not the one which the psychologists or novelists understand to be i.e.; the self with human motivation, feeling, intention, unconsciousness and so on.<sup>65</sup> His self is sociological self which has to be approached as a social institution and is observed and analyzed through externally observable forms of conduct. His sociological self has three versions, the earlier ones in turn being incorporated into the later ones. The first version can be termed as ‘two-selves’ version. This regards self as composed of two separable entities – ‘*character and performer*’ but also as the combined entity of ‘the self as a performed character’. This incorporates the dramaturgical

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<sup>63</sup> Goffman, Erving – Presentation of self in Everyday life, 1959, Penguin Books Ltd.

<sup>64</sup> Williams, Robin- Erving Goffman. In Rob Stones’ (ed) – Key Sociological thinkers, 1998

<sup>65</sup> *ibid.* p-154

approach and is found in such works as ' *The presentation of self in Everyday life*'. The second version regards self as the product of a set of social-especially organizational-circumstances. Such understanding of self is found in ' *Asylums*' (Goffman, 1962).

The third version presents a more flexible notion of self as social process. This regards self as not an entity half-concealed behind events, but a changeable formula for managing oneself during such events. Overall, the concept of self of Goffman has a physical dimension. What counts in social interaction are the movements and adjustments we constantly make in order to amplify, adapt, refine and reapply the elementary functioning of what physical capabilities we have.

Goffman's dramaturgical metaphor considers the way in which the individual in ordinary work situations presents himself and his activity to others, the way in which he guides and controls the impression they form of him, and the kinds of things he may and may not do while sustaining his performance before them<sup>66</sup> He tries to fit in theatrical nuances into the social interaction. The stage in a theatrical performance presents things that are make-believe; presumably life presents things that are real and sometimes not well rehearsed. More important, perhaps, on the stage one player presents himself in the guise of a character to characters projected by other players; the audience constitutes a third party to the interaction - one that is essential. In real life, the three parties are compressed into two; the part one individual plays is tailored to the parts played by the others present and yet these others also constitute the audience.

Social interaction in a given situation is a very complex art, the art of impression management. The individual will have to act so that he intentionally or unintentionally expresses himself and the others (audience) will in turn have to be impressed in some way by him. Goffman talks of two kinds of communication in this regard – expressions given and expressions given off. The first involves verbal symbols or their substitutes, which the people in the interaction situation understand. This is a traditional and narrow sense. The second involves a wide range of action that others can treat as symptomatic of the actor, the expectation being that the action was performed for reasons other than the information conveyed in this way. This is a broad sense, which is the more theatrical and contextual kind. But both the communications can intentionally convey misinformation – the first involving deceit and the second feigning.<sup>67</sup>

Performance by an individual in a social situation involves a manipulation of his personality so that it may look completely real to the others. It is not a historical accident that the meaning of the word 'person' is a mask. A person, in a social interaction situation, is always

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<sup>66</sup> Goffman, E (1959). P-11

<sup>67</sup> *ibid.* p-14



wearing a mask, which conceals his real personality and is playing a role in accordance with the situation. He is always portraying himself as the right person for the given role. This metaphor can be incorporated into the concept of front, which is that part of the individual's performance, which regularly functions, in a general and fixed fashion to define the situation for those who observe the performance. In the personal front Goffman includes: insignia of office of rank; clothing; sex, age, and racial characteristics; size and looks; posture; speech patterns; facial expressions; bodily gestures etc.<sup>68</sup> In order to maintain a fixed personal front a performer maintains a coherence between appearance and manner. Otherwise he will be caught off-guard. He performs consistently with the event or situation. He shows what he wants to convey in order to make his action significant. This involves idealization of oneself in which he projects himself as someone more qualified, more decent and more adjustable than he really is. This idealization is seen in the stratificatory structures. Commonly we find that upward mobility involves the presentation of proper performances and that efforts to move upward and efforts to keep from moving downward are expressed in terms of sacrifices made for the maintenance of front.

Performance of an individual differs depending upon the kind of place he is in, Goffman calls this place '*region*'.<sup>69</sup> He defines region as any place that is bounded to some degree by barriers to perception. Depending upon the type of region the behaviour called '*region behaviour*' also differs. There are two types of regions – *front region* and *back region or backstage*. The front region is the place where, the performance is given. It has a proper 'setting' involving furniture, décor, physical layout and other background items, which supply the scenery and stage props for the spate of human action played on, within or before it. This front region may be any public place of close interaction such as restaurant, an auditorium, doctor's consulting room, floor of a shop, convention hall etc. The performance of an individual in a front region may be seen as an effort to give an appearance that his activity in the region maintains and embodies certain standards. These standards seem to fall into two broad groupings. One grouping has to do with the way in which the performer treats the audience while engaged in talk with them or in gestural interchanges that are a substitute for talk. These standards are sometimes referred to as matters of politeness. The other group of standards has to do with the way in which the performer behaves himself while in visual or aural range of the audience but not necessarily engaged in talk with them. Goffman calls this second group of standards as '*decorum*'. The part of the personal front called '*manner*' is more in action in the first group of standards and the other part called '*appearance*' is more into the second group. The decorum involves one's effort to impress the

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<sup>68</sup> *ibid.* p-34

<sup>69</sup> *ibid.* p-109

audience. It is more pervasive than the politeness. So, it can be summed up that performers can stop giving expressions (1<sup>st</sup> group of standards) but can not stop giving them off (2<sup>nd</sup> group of standards).

A '*back region*' or '*backstage*' is the place where the suppressed facts make an appearance. It is a place relative to a given performance (on the first region), where the impression fostered by the performance is knowingly contradicted as a matter of course. This place is cut off from the front region by a partition and guarded passage-way. The audience is not allowed to have an access to this area. The behaviour of an individual is quite different from the one he adorns in the front region. Here he sheds the character he plays in the front region, is relaxed and casual, talks freely etc. He is engaged in his private life, which is not visible to the audience. This is also the place where the performer is readied to present himself to the audience. It is the place where he practices the art of impression management. This may be the kitchen of a restaurant, one's study or private room etc.

The relationship between the front region and back region can be seen in Goffman's study of *Shetland Hotel* [a part of his study of a Shetland Island crafting (subsistence farming) community]. There is discrepancy between kitchen ways (backstage) and parlour ways (front region) in the hotel. Within the hotel kitchen, where the guests' food is prepared and where the staff eats and spends their day, crafters' culture prevails. In this region reciprocal first naming is employed even between the employers and the employees. They eat the boiled fish, potatoes etc. together in island's eating style. They even eat the stale bread and cake and also the ones left by the guests. But such kitchen behaviour is shedded once they are with a guest. The guests are served with good manner and good quality and well-decorated food. In the presence of a guest the employer maintains a superior image above the employees, which is in contradiction to the behaviour shown in the kitchen region. This show of decency and cleanliness in the fronstage hides some ugly scenes also. During the meal time rush hour, once used drinking glasses would sometimes be merely emptied and wiped instead of being rewashed, thus allowing them to be put back into circulation quickly.

This example clearly indicates how the front region is manipulated by the back region. Apart from these two regions, Goffman also talks of a third region. This is called '*the outside*' i.e., all the places other than the two places discussed above. A building may have both the front and back region. The outer walls of the building cut both types of rooms off from the outside world. Those individuals who are on the outside of the establishment we may call '*outsiders*'. All these separations of regions are in reference to a particular performance. The outsider may also influence the front region within a building by his sudden intrusion. There is always changing of

faces of the performers to suit, the interaction situation. So, performer is always making impression on others or audience in order to be accepted as a number of the situation.

### **STRUCTURE OF THE CHAPTERS**

In this chapter I have dealt with various concepts related to theatre and its application to the study of society. I started out with the discussion of differences and similarities between theatre and drama and then moved on to the binary system of ritual and theatre. Then I dealt with some of the important elements of theatre such as acting; make-up, mask and costume; directing and audience. These above aspects of theatre are employed in the dramaturgical analysis of society. In this connection I have picked up Victor Turner and discussed his use of metaphor such as social drama; Role theory which includes both structural and processual approaches; and then the famous dramaturgical analysis of microlevel social interactions of Erving Goffman.

The second chapter, "*Forms and contents of some of the popular traditional theatres around the world*", discusses the development of theatre through seven broad phases. It does not discuss the various forms of theatre of these seven phases but only confines itself to the first two phases. This is deliberately done as these two phases are still in the initial stage of theatrical development and which are simple in performance quite like my main subject of analysis, "Shumang lila". The concepts discussed in the first chapter (*Prologue*) will certainly help in understanding these traditional theatres picked up from around the world. This chapter, in a way, will be of great help in discerning the complexities of "Shumang lila".

The third chapter called, "*The Manipuri society from historico-politico-religious perspectives*", is certainly a break from the current topic of analysis discussed in the previous two chapters but it is certainly not out of context. This chapter will discuss the social structure of 'Meiteis', the majority valley people of Manipur. This will sail through its history, traditional political structure, religions (both prevaisnavite and Vaisnavite) and above all the status of women in the whole social structure of the valley society. This also deals with the inter-ethnic relationship between the Meiteis and other ethnic groups of the valley such as the Lois, the Yaithibis, the Bishnupriyas and the Bamons (all under Meitei fold); and Pangans (Muslims). This chapter will serve as homework for the readers to discern the fourth chapter.

The fourth chapter, "*The Craft of Shumang lila and the Manipuri society*", talks about 'Shumang lila' as a community theatre quite similar to the ones discussed in the second chapter. This chapter traces the history of development of Shumang lila. This development is seen as a reflection of certain changes in the social milieu. In this chapter, I have tried to show that this is a

secular form of play, which has a rudimentary element of ritual, which is shown by the puja and the invocation songs before the start of a play. It also deals with different nuances of theatrical production – performing space surrounded by the audience, props, acting, directing, music etc. One of the most intriguing characteristics of this theatre is the male transvestite actors whom I call “*Male Actresses*”. The social aspect of their continuance in this theatre is also discussed. In discussing the structure of audience, I have tried to bring in the fairly egalitarian nature of the Manipuri society. The absence of ranks among the audience is given a sociological analysis in this chapter. The chapter winds up with the discussion on the changing trend of this community theatre. To make the work little colourful I have incorporated a collection of twelve photographs which depict different faces of a Shumang lila play. They are intended to say something. They are a view and a comment, and visual notations of Shumang lila.<sup>70</sup>

The last chapter, *Epilogue*, will weave through all these above chapters and bind with a connecting thread.

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<sup>70</sup> Geertz, Clifford; Geertz, Hildred and Rosen, Lawrence – Meaning and order in Moroccan Society, Three essays in cultural analysis. 1979, Cambridge University Press. Photographic essay by Paul Hyman.

# CHAPTER 2

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## FORMS AND CONTENTS

### OF SOME OF THE POPULAR TRADITIONAL

### THEATRES AROUND THE WORLD

‘Actions speak louder than words’. This is an aphorism which seems most appropriate to theatre. Mere reading of a play does not create that strong theatrical impact which an enactment of it does. For instance, we can read Hamlet’s soliloquies or Anthony’s funeral oration and grasp their meanings, their revelation of character and the music of their measures, but how much greater is our emotion and aesthetic pleasure when we hear the words pronounced by a fine actor<sup>1</sup>. In performance, one embodies in that action whatever he has to say. Moreover, there can be theatre in the absence of the words but only actions. Charlie Chaplin is an outstanding example of this. All one needs, here, is the symbolic representation of the words in action. So, theatre is an act. Performance, according to Richard Schechner<sup>2</sup>, is the impulse to be serious, and to entertain; to collect meaning and to pass the time; to display symbolic behavior that actualizes ‘there and then’ and to exist only ‘here and now’; to be oneself and to play at being others; to be in a trance and to be conscious; to get results and to fool around; to focus the action on and for a select group sharing a hermetic language and to broadcast to the largest possible audiences of strangers who buy tickets. Though theatre is based on performance of the actors, its essence does not lie even in what is performed. It does not lie even in the way it is performed. The essence of theatre lies in the impression made on the audience by the manner in which one performs. Theatre, then, is a reactive art<sup>3</sup>.

In this chapter the emphasis will be given on the history of theatre around the world. Theatre developed phase by phase and there is addition of a new accretion over the previously existing one. Theatre can be taken as an onion<sup>4</sup> whose accretions can be peeled off one by one to get at the heart of what theatre really is. This means the most recent accretion is at the top of it and the oldest one at the core. Going by this process, scenery, the most recent accretion, will be peeled off first. Scenery is here

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<sup>1</sup> Rice Elmer-The living theatre. 1960, William Heinemann Ltd. London., p-17

<sup>2</sup> Schechner, Richard-Performative circumstances from the Avant Garde to Ramlila. 1983, Seagull books, Calcutta, p-151

<sup>3</sup> Southern, Richard-The seven ages of the theatre. 1962, Faber and Faber, London, p-26

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p-21

today but was not there some four hundred years ago. Then the next to go would be auditorium; the theatre is then out of doors. Next might follow the stage as a raised platform to act upon; take that away and the players are on the ground. Going relentlessly on, the player would next have to be stripped of his costume and mask. Remove them and there will probably fall apart two separate pieces, leaving nothing inside; these two pieces would be the player and the audience. Take these apart and ~~there~~ can be no theatre. So, we now finally reach at the core of theatre where it has only the player and the audience.

At the beginning a player appeared only with his personal resources such as his voice, his gesture, his appearance (mask, costume) and his instruments (properties, drums etc.). But gradually new external resources such as his place (the place where he acts), his stage and his background (including his scenery) were added to and developed and his show consequently made more complex more highly organized and more civilized. It can be called evolution, yet it is evolution in a spiral sense round a center rather than evolution along a straight path from something imperfect to some eventual perfection. Again this development of theatre is by phases and not by chronological dates. This is because, one country may cling to one phase for many centuries and perhaps develop it highly, yet have no occasion to go beyond it. Another may pass in a hundred years through two or more phases in response to the changing course of its civilization. For instance, the phase, which was present in the classical Greece in 500B.C., might have to wait till 16<sup>th</sup> century A.D. in most of the surrounding world. Again Japan may reach a developed stage of another phase in the 1300s and England in the 1600s. So, mere dates have nothing to do with this evolution and it is unprofitable to relate world theatre history to any framework of dates.

The theatres can be grouped into seven broad phases<sup>5</sup>.

The *first* phase is the presentation of the *costumed players*; or the player's presentation of his costumed self-costumed so as to act as some other self. There is no external resource beyond him and what he wears or carries. This phase is present in most of the other phases. It can achieve the highest and the purest and even the most sophisticated heights of theatre without even the modern paraphernalia of theatre. The 2<sup>nd</sup> phase ushers in *the great festival performances* with the use of other resources other than costumes. There is preliminary use of raised stages; arrangements for the placing and seating of spectators; use of scripts for performance. Despite these the performance is still in the open air and is performed on special, ritual occasions in the year. There is still a dominating religious element. There is lack of professionalism among the performers though there are elaborate arrangements for the occasion.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p-32

The 3<sup>rd</sup> phase is the starting of *secular plays*; the shows decrease in scale; the performers decrease in number; the arrangements become simple rather than elaborate; the shows become specialized. There starts professionalism in the performance with the seasonal element giving way for the any- time- of the year performance. The contents become more satirical and philosophical rather than religious. The audience becomes smaller as compared to the 2<sup>nd</sup> phase. Though the performances are mostly in the open air, there starts, sometimes, indoor performances.

The 4<sup>th</sup> phase sees *the invention of organized stage* when professional players begin to organize the area they play upon and the background they play against so as to offer themselves certain regular facilities. This phase also sees the 'scenic background' to augment the visual effect of the show. So, scenery as we know today is born. Still this phase is outdoor and reluctant to move inside the fully roofed building.

A revolution takes place in the 5<sup>th</sup> phase. It takes theatrical performances permanently *indoor*. There are many reasons for this--- scenery takes a popular hold of the performance and painted scenery cannot easily survive the weather, nor be effectively displayed without the glamour of lighting. As the performances become frequent and even take place daily, protection is needed for the audience from weather conditions and other disturbances. Moreover there comes a change from the emotional evocation present in early theatre to an intellectual evocation. So, there is reduction in a spectator's resistance to low temperature. This means there is need for well-protected place for a performance. The first indoors are roofed playhouse buildings, which are princely rooms for a new sort of aristocratic musical theatricals and then followed by public buildings of a similar shape but run for commercial profit.

The 6<sup>th</sup> phase is a phase of an artistic development more prominent than any of the above phases. The indoor public scenic show develops into a spectacle of illusion in tune with the trend of society of the time. Though it has most of the elements of above phases, what it specifies itself is the peculiar idea of the theater as the place of illusion. The *last* phase of this evolution of theatre is based primarily upon an artistic idiom characterizing the whole of the world of its age. It is particularly a reaction from the preceding phase i.e., the 6<sup>th</sup> phase. It is the phase of anti illusion.

Here, the study will be focused on the first 2 phases of theatre as they are relevant and comparable to the present subject of analysis i.e., *Shumang Lila* in chapter 4. It is more so because they are traditional or primitive, less affected by the modern theatre. There is existence of theatrical elements in the rituals, which can be claimed as the germ of theatre. So, some forms of the traditional theatre around the world will be picked up and studied to see the parallelism with *Shumang Lila*, the present specific area of analysis.



## 1. The Bavarian wild men

This is an example of ritual having theatrical elements. This comes under the first phase i.e., the costumed player. It is an ancient ceremony surviving in the Bavarian mountains. On the eve of *St. Nicholas' day* (6 December)<sup>6</sup>, certain masked men come out of the snowy woods on skis and approach a village. These 'wild men' wear voluminous distorting costumes of animal skins and heavy concealing headdress with horns or antlers. Blowing horns of elfland, they knock each and every door and window and claim kisses from the girls or catch them in the street and rub them with snow. During this ceremony most of the older inhabitants and children remain indoor and peer through the windows into the night. This ceremony lasts till daybreak. This ritual ceremony does not have the elements of the conventional theatre such as words, play, particular place of performance, stage, scenery, playhouse and rehearsal. And most of all, it does not have even the assembled audience. But there are costumes and masks and there may be a quality of improvisation, for not one of these performers can know just what will happen or how the night will go. This very uncertainty is an experience, which no player ever escapes in modern theatre. So, this particular quality of the unpredictable and its accompanying demands for a quick ability to improvise makes this ritual ceremony a theatre.

Other than these, there are some theatrical elements, which prove that this ceremony is also a work of theatre. They can be seen in 1. *Procession*, 2. *Visitation in disguise* and 3. *The animal*.

The first element is an example of processional theatre known to the world. Here 'wild men' go from house to house and spread the magic about the whole community. It is the duty of much of the primitive theatre to communicate good omen. So, primitive people wish to do this not only to themselves personally but to their flocks, to their crops, to their hearths and homes for the coming year. This communication of good wishes by the wild men with horns create the processional element in this ceremony. Why the second element 'visitation in disguise', which is a part of this ceremony, can be said theatrical act is because there are such other instances which are regarded as theatrical act. For instance, '*Mummings*' or processions of disguised riders at night to a house with the purpose of bestowing a gift, constitute the source from which derives the court masque<sup>7</sup> in English theatre history. The presence of animal element in this ritual ceremony is an instance of theatre. The fantastic horse of the pantomime can substantiate this.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid. p37

<sup>7</sup> Masque-Vesse drama, often with music and dancing, Popular in England in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries

From the above, it is known that there is equal presence of theatrical elements in both the primitive and modern theatres. This means, art is not a thing that grows nearer to perfection the more civilized society becomes. A cave painting can evoke a similar satisfaction to that offered by the classic masters and the great moderns. So, great theater is great theatre whatever its period and primitive theatre is neither crude nor ineffectual merely because it is primitive. So, the Bavarian wild men are performing a theatrical job when they perform the ritual ceremony though they hardly know of the fact.

## **2.The Padstow Horse**

It is a ritual ceremony celebrated in Padstow, a town on the North coast of Cornwall<sup>8</sup>. It contains a significant theatrical element, which is a step forward than the Bavarian wild men. Though the performer wears a mask, the performance contains the double layer of meaning, which is the characteristic of a work of art. In the manifest level the action expresses death and birth but in the latent level there is the expression of the ideal of living. It is a ceremony of good luck and fertility in the coming year.

The ceremony consists of parading of a peculiar mask round the town on the evening of 30 April, to the accompaniment of ' *the night song*'. This creates an element of processional theatre. The mask in consideration is a black one with a tall, painted headdress which has white lines on it. The headdress has bow or knot of hair at its tip. The eyes of the mask are encircled by white lines; a red tongue hangs from the mouth; there are heavy grey eyebrows and beard of hair; great 'ears' project upward. The actual ritual ceremony starts on the May day (1<sup>st</sup> May) when a male performer wears this mask. In addition to this mask the performer also wears a circle of black material some five feet in diameter around his neck, which stretches horizontally on a hoop at the level of his shoulders. From the hoop a sort of great black skirt hangs covering the wearer right down to the ground. From the front of the hoop projects a small, carved grotesque horse's head, with a movable jaw and a mane made from a cow's tail. Behind, on the opposite side, is a crude, gay horsetail.

On the determined day the 'horse' is cajoled by a *Mayer* (a may man) or teaser with a club and the horse runs after the Mayer and then starts dancing to the accompaniment of songs and accordion, mandolin and drum. Theatre manifests itself when he starts dancing and when he conquers the

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Southern, Richard. Op. cit. p-40

audience. “*The diabolical, creeping crinoline becomes a completely unrecognizable swirl of shining black magic for which the words ‘awe-inspiring’ are merely fitting. It creates its own background of primal jungle. It is savage and terrible*”<sup>9</sup>. When he dances with full endeavor, the sight becomes quite ambiguous and transcends any relation to the shape of horse or man.

There are two further details, which are important to be mentioned. First, at a certain line of the song, the horse must sink to the ground and lie motionless. This symbolizes the death. At another moment he must bounce into the air revived. This symbolizes the life. Second, during dancing, occasionally, he pursues a woman and hurls his skirt over her. This is considered to be a good omen for a woman. This way she has been given the mark of the horse. This is particularly good for the married women. This signifies the bestowing of fertility to the women. All this is an instance of imitative magic ceremony. Though it is a ritual ceremony, it has that essence of theatre i.e., moving the audience.

### **3.The British Mummers’ play**

This is again an example of ritual ceremony showing those theatrical elements. This is a seasonal ceremony celebrated throughout England, in various versions, from Cumberland to Lincolnshire and down to Dorset<sup>10</sup>, unlike the Padstow Horse which is local. The performance season is generally around Christmas, more especially on *Boxing Day*<sup>11</sup>, or on *Twelfth Night*<sup>12</sup> or on plough Monday. The ceremony is concerned with the turn of the sun towards the ascendant again and the inspiring and immense task of resuming works for a new year after the *solstice* (about 22 December in the Northern hemisphere when the sun is farthest from the earth). Though there are many versions found in England, all of them carry the same central theme, the conflict of a hero with an adversary, his defeat and death, his cure and return to life. But the surviving versions are quite corrupted. In some versions it is not the hero who is vanquished but the adversary while the hero is left in triumph. In some versions the hero is king George or earlier he is saint George. But this is a later addition to the

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid. p-42

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p-45

<sup>11</sup> Boxing Day-The first week day after Christmas Day.

<sup>12</sup> Twelfth night-Night before the feast of the Epiphany [held on the 6<sup>th</sup> January in memory of the coming of the Magi (3 wisemen from the East) to the baby Jesus at Bethlehem]

primitive ones. Originally, this ceremony is pre-Christian i.e., of pre 10<sup>th</sup> century England<sup>13</sup>. The theatre in this Mummers' play can be seen in form of the costume, the words and the action.

### **The costume: ---**

Though the men taking part in this ceremony today occasionally wear strange versions of modern or period or non descript clothes, the true Mummer wears 'papers'. The dress consists of an old coat, covered with sewn-on strips of newspaper or ribbons. The headdress is similarly bedecked and so profusely that the strips hang down and entirely hide the face and head of the wearer. This way, the whole man is transformed into a walking, rustling, white anonymity of fluttering. Only thing, which assumes humanity, is his farm boots. On the eve of the ceremony these Mummers break in the houses with song and ordered masque and a terrible clashing of wooden swords. They powder the floor with snow, stamp and declaim till all is whirl and riot. This enactment leaves an authentic impression on the spectators, which means it is a theatrical work.

### **The words**

The Mummers' play is more of action than words. But there are some significant words spoken by the hero or the exchange of words between the hero and the adversary. The hero utters some opening lines called the vaunt. For example, "*here am I, St. George, an Englishman so stout.....*" etc. When two players give their vaunts in opposition to each other, there arises the next element of the drama i.e., the stripes. In case of the Mummers' play, the strife is between two vaunted heroes before a group of supporting characters—agon and antagonist before a chorus<sup>14</sup>. The words are "sing-song", or chanted; they are spoken in a deliberate convention. The words are not clear in their meaning. But to be clear is to be certain and thus to be limited. Certainty and mysticism cannot live together. More than words is the action in case of Mummers' play. It is a fact that a dramatic action is not a dramatic action if the player has to say what as he performs it. All good theatre should be comprehensible to a deaf man, so far as the action represented goes.

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<sup>13</sup> Southern, Richard. Op. cit. p-56

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. p-47

## **The action**

The actions in this are embedded in -- A. *The killing itself*, B. *The processional element* and C. *Spatial relation* between a performance and the audience who watches it.

### **A. *The killing*: --**

This is the fall of the hero in the hands of the adversary. Such representation has been seen in the Padstow horse who dies while he dances. In Mummers' play the only variation is that the hero dies due to a sword fight with his adversary. The entire scene is illustrated with the help of action alone without any word. This is a perfect example of theatrical work. It remains a thing done, not said. It grips the spectators with instant, inexplicable clutch.

The fallen hero is then revived and brought back to life. Then all the players march in procession round the hero and the adversary with a song called '*the singing of the travels*', outlining incidents in a farmer's life of travail. All ends with a traditional request to the lady of the house, where the performance takes place to

*...Tie a bow of ribbon now on this our Christmas holly bough.*

### **B. *The processional element***

The action implied in this procession is clear. The performers march to a house, present the play before the assembled household, give a final address to the master or lady of the house, leave the house and then march to a fresh house to perform again. A variation of the play and the procession is still in the existence in *Marshfield* in Gloucestershire, which may be the basis from which the system of the English medieval pageant cars arose. Marshfield is a small but elongated town along either side of a street. On the Boxing Day morning, 7 Mummers headed by the town crier march towards the market place at one end of the town and perform for 15-20 minutes before a gathered audience. Then they further march down and give their second performance at a street corner. The third performance is given further down the street. The fourth performance is given at the other end of the town. On their journey from the other end they make a detour and give their final performance or performances in the garden before one of the local gentry's houses. This whole process of performance and procession in whole Marshfield is a probable representative of an occasion in the primitive days of the pagan theatre long ago. The ground for this claim is the presence of strife, a death of the hero and a revival by magic. Due to the advent of Christianity, the content of the play changed with the imposition of the vast bible story upon the compact aboriginal myth, but the form of the play is maintained intact in all the performances.

### ***C. The circle***

It is the spatial relation of the spectators with regard to the performance. The audience makes a circle around the performance in an open space. It is the gathering round of the crowd to look at an incident, nothing more formal or more regular than that. It is one of the most convenient arrangements as the spectators will have an ample space to witness the performance.

Any description of a theatrical performance is incomplete without the clear-cut description of the place of the performance. It must give a sufficient clue to form a picture of the immediate surrounding. So, there are three items, which are essential for such descriptions. They are *a)* the area in which the action takes place; *b)* The way the spectators are situated with regard to that area and *c)* the way or ways, by which the players enter and leave that area. At Marshfield the first item is a street corner or the ground of the open market place. The second item is when the spectators dispose themselves in regard to this area simply by coming and taking up positions at will round the sides of it. Here, the entrance is by a side street between the surrounding houses and through the ring of spectators. After making entrance to the performing space the seven players form a circle of 60 ft in circumference. They station at the peripheries and move towards the center to perform their own parts or to perform a concerted action. This performance takes into account the surrounding environment and not a performance in isolation from the outside world. Such isolation could not take place in any of the early phases of theatre development. All early theatre shows were essentially seen and experienced in the conditions of normal reality –of light and weather and landscape – on the familiar earth, under the everyday sky; or at night in the homely hall of a normal country house by the usual candle or torchlight. So, the Mummies' play of England and Shumang Lila of Manipur are not exceptions to this down to earth (literally) theatres.

## **4. Bali.**

Bali (Indonesia) has a rich tradition of dance drama of costumed player type. Theirs is highly developed dance; they use remarkable costumes and superb masks. Balinese performances are varied and so one description will not be sufficient to do justice to them all. But all of them share some general features. Firstly, in Bali, any place surrounded by a close-packed mass of humanity is a stage (not a raised one but only an acting area). The dances are designed to be seen from all sides so that the background is always that of the people. Secondly the stage is a hollow square whose one side is occupied by the orchestra and other three sides by the audience. Such acting area may be anywhere suitable, outside a temple, in a courtyard, in a village street, on the bare earth. The entrance is through

the audience and from any convenient building. The performances are done both in daytime and nighttime. Not all players are masked but a few only.

The performances are non-commercial i.e., the money the players are offered is used to buy costumes and instruments and to pay a celebrated teacher for further instruction. The orchestra is elaborate, the dancing subtle to a degree, and free use of improvisation on occasion. The contents of the performances are the stories of the Hindu epics. Main characters of the play speak *kawi*, the classical language of Java and Bali which is unintelligible to masses but understood by only a few highly educated people. The clowns speak in the vernacular. As it will be an elaborate task to detail all the Balinese dance dramas, let us pick up the Barong play, which is an outstanding example of the fabulous animal in primitive theatre techniques.

### *The Barong play*

The *Barong* play is an animal like the oriental dragon. His back is at the level of the man's head<sup>15</sup>. His flanks are made of very rich swags of hair or cut strips of material. Plates of cut leather decorate his back. He has splendid arched tail. The most remarkable feature is his vast and elaborate mask with its lavish leather surroundings, all worn in front of the wearer's breast, instead of wearing it on the face, to give a characteristic of hunched shoulder quality. The barong has human legs below this fantastic animal body. He is made by two men to install four legs. But the appearance of the Barong varies in different parts of Bali.

The Barong play is also a death and resurrection play like the plays discussed above. All its variations maintain the following features: ---

- a. A fight between the Barong dragon and the evil witch-figure called *Rangda*;
- b. The temporary defeat of the Barong;
- c. An attack upon the Rangda by ordinary villagers with daggers.
- d. The magical turning of the daggers upon the villagers by their own hands and their trance orgy of self-stabbing;
- e. The revival of the villagers by the benevolent, circulating Barong with magic in its beard.

In this play the evil spirits are also powerful ones. The Balinese are afraid of displeasing them. So, the evil spirits are not destroyed or killed as in other plays of other parts of the world. Instead they merely disappear. It is a sacrilege in the Barong play to finish the play. Such conventions are also found in other plays also. In England, it is taboo to speak the last line of a play at rehearsal.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid. p-76

In Bali, a dancer puts on a fresh flower in her hair (even male dancers too). In case of masked dancers, the fresh flower is stuck in the headdress. This latter gives a combination of the fresh fragrance of the flower with the dead mask. So, Barong with the mask creates the perfect theatrical effect by supplanting the human characteristics. Here man acts only as animators by concealing himself under the animal i.e., the Barong.

## 5.Kathakali

Now, let us take the floodlight of costumed player closer to home-- Kathakali of Kerala. It is a dance drama, which has reached quite exceptional and significant intricacy by exploiting make-up and body movements. It is a kind of theatre more advanced than any we have discussed so far. It is par excellence, an example of costumed players theatre. It has developed without ever encountering the need to adventure into the problems of accommodating large audiences or of erecting stages of designing elaborate backgrounds or of evolving scenic machines or of building playhouses of recognizing such a problem as the nature of stage illusion<sup>16</sup>. Everything is created with the help of performers' personal resource. It has raised the arts of costume and make-up and the language of movement to levels that have not been passed, and rarely equaled, even in the latest phases of the theatre in modern times.

Kathakali literally means story play. It is a vigorous, masculine (all the roles are traditionally played by men), dynamic dance drama constantly involving, changing and adapting in complex and fascinating ways as the world around it changes. This form of dance drama dates from the 17<sup>th</sup> century when it evolved from the confluence of ritual/folk, classical and martial sources under the patronage of the rulers (rajahs) and landholders of Kerala's major principalities<sup>17</sup>. Traditionally it is a night long programme lasting from dusk to dawn performed mostly outdoors – household courtyards or outside the temple compound. The performances are done by the troupes invited by the temples and individuals as an annual affair. The performance season starts in September as the monsoon begins to decline and goes upto the end of April.

Kathakali enacts the texts (*atta kathas*) based on India's great epics, the *Mahabharata*, the *Ramayana*, the *Bhagavata Purana*, the *Siva Purana* and the vast body of mythological themes known to Indian literature in their special kerala versions. Historically the Kathakali can be traced to two

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid. p-68

<sup>17</sup> Zarrilli, Philip-The Kathakali complex-Actor, Performance and Structure. 1984, Abhinav Publications, New Delhi. P-3



king<sup>18</sup>. The first king was *Zamorin* of Calicut, a devotee of Krishna, who wrote plays known as *Krishnattam*, which were patterned on the lyrics of the *Gita Govinda* by Jayadeva. The second king was the raja of Kottaraka who wrote series of eight plays about Rama, which were called *Ramanattam* as distinct from the *Krishnattam*. It is believed that the actors spoke their own lines in both the forms of the play. But later this enunciation by the actors gave way to the actors restricting to elaborate miming (*Angika Abhinaya*) and the musicians singing the lyrics. Gradually, this acting without word or pantomime was further refined; eventually, it reached a sophistication which we, now, recognize as Kathakali. Kathakali, now, makes the proper use of music both vocal and instrumental (percussion included). All this is important to create the effective dramatic spectacle. It is a form of total theatre where nrtya (mimetic art), abhinaya (acting) and music blend to give an integrated whole. But the most striking element in Kathakali is its overwhelming dramatic quality. In this, gods and heroes, demons and spirit appear from another world in costumes and headgears, which are awe-inspiring and belong exclusively to a world of myth and legend.

Now, let us unfold the intricacies involved in a complete presentation of Kathakali one by one.

a. *The setting*

The performance space of Kathakali is traditionally in the open air. A simple rectangular space of 4-5 feet in width and 5-6 feet in length<sup>19</sup> is cleared on the ground either in family compounds or in village temple. Four poles are erected one at each corner of the rectangle whose tops are joined one another by four other transverse bamboo poles corresponding to the rectangle and by two diagonal poles. The roof and the backside of the area are covered by clothes. Then, the floor of this performance area is washed with mixture of cow dung and urine<sup>20</sup> to purify it. After that the area is strewn with sand and grass.

The audience gathers on three sides although the concentration of audience is in front of the performance space. Women usually sit to the left and men to the right. The patrons, guest of honour and connoisseurs sit closest to the 'stage' area. There is a large oil lamp with multiple cloth wicks, kept upon a stand of around four feet, between the audience and the stage area. In olden days, this served as the only source of light to witness the whole performance. The lamp is raised so, to illuminate the face, hands, eyes and upper body, which are the main foci of attention in this dance drama form. The actors enter the area either by passing through the audience or more commonly from

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<sup>18</sup> Vatsyayan, Kapila-Indian classical dance. 1974, Publication division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Govt. of India. P-37

<sup>19</sup> Zarrilli, Philip. Op. cit. p-149

<sup>20</sup> Southern., Richard. Op. cit. p-72

the back of the acting area from the green room. One addition in this presentation is the use of a curtain in the front of the stage held up by two assistants. This is a special entrant in this phase of theatrical development i.e., costumed player.

### ***b. Character type***

The characters in Kathakali are grouped into types. It has about six types<sup>21</sup>. In accordance with certain canons of the epic traditions, drama is built by counter-posing certain types of characters against others. The *first* type includes the demi-gods or the heroes. They can be generally identified as the *Dhrodatta* heroes of the Sanskrit drama or the *sattvika* characters of the Mahabharata and the Ramayana. This way, Krishna and Rama are gods and good heroes. These characters are calm, good humoured, heroic and are seen in their moods of grace and of valour but never in fear or disgust. When they are angry they assume *raudra rupa* (mood of anger). Such is seen in Bhima's killing of Dussasana, the 2<sup>nd</sup> eldest brother of the Kauravas.

*Secondly*, there are the characters of the anti-heroes and the villains, both human and demon. They represent negative forces and are usually aggressive, treacherous and ferocious. These villains may be kings, or gods or female demons.

*Thirdly*, there are the humorous characters. Hanuman is a character who essays such humorous scenes. For instance, in the story relating to the capture of the royal horse by Lava and Kusa and in the story of the meeting of Bhima with Hanuman in the drama-- *Kalyana Sougandhikam*, there are some humour without being ironical or satirical.

The *4th* type includes characters manifesting animal features. They include half-man half-lion *Narasimha* (Pralad charitam); half-man half-bird *Hamsa* (nalatcharitam); and monkey deity Hanuman.

*Fifthly*, there are a few characters who cannot justifiably fall into any of the above larger types. These include the ordinary humans such as women, rishis, children, messengers etc.

*Finally*, there are characters representing tribal people and aborigines who live in woods and forests. Siva disguised as *kirata* (hunter) in *kirattam*, an episode from the Mahabharata, is an example of this type.

### ***C. Make-up***

Kathakali has evolved a highly complex and symbolic system of make-up. Make-up for all the characters is not the same. They have different colors of make-up according to the character, which is

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<sup>21</sup> Vatsyayan, Kapila. Op. cit. p-43

quite symbolic. As with the ragas and raginis of the Indian musical system, here also, certain colours are associated with particular moods and sentiments (rasas). Normally light green represents *Srngar rasa*<sup>22</sup> (erotic sentiment), red *raudra* (furious) and yellow *adbhuta* (wonder). The reason for these intricate make-up is not only to cover the human face but also to transform the actor into a god or a demon. Once the actor has donned the make-up he is not himself but the character he plays. Even before his first stage entrance no one should address the actor by his own name once he has put on the make-up.

If the characters are sattvika, the first type of characters, the basic make-up is green, pachcha. The cheeks, upto the jawbone are covered with a light green paste and the eyes are elongated to give them a design which can be described as 'lotus-eyes'. The forehead has a white pigment and can take different designs depending upon the particular character. Thus, Krishna has a different forehead design from that of Arjuna. The jawbone is exaggerated by pasting along it cut-outs of paper to give the face enlarged dimensions. When these characters become furious (*raudra*), a large, ferocious moustache in black is drawn on the basic green make-up along the upper lip reaching to the upper cheek-bone. This can be witnessed when Bheema takes the *raudra* appearance.

When a character cannot be adjudged as villain or anti-hero but as having *rajasik* (passion or courage) guna, the basic green make-up is broken by red patches, for instance, Ravana. Again to distinguish them from the sattvic characters, an oval red and white design is made on the nose and on the upper cheek. The style of moustache is the same in both this character and *raudra* character of pachcha. To make them more fantastic than human, a white blob of pith is attached to the nose.

Another important constituent of make-up is the beard (*tadi*)<sup>23</sup>. It is worn by anti-heroes, villains, demons and some special types but not by the heroes. The red beard is worn by the evil character mostly involved in destructive deeds. In addition to other facial decoration, these characters attach two fangs to the lips. With the screams and cries, they succeed in creating an atmosphere of the nether world on the stage. The black beards are worn by the aborigines the offbeat characters like the *kirata* (Siva disguised as hunter). The white beard, known as *veluppu tadi*, indicates the third type of half human gods like hanuman. In case of characters like the lion god (Narasimha), the basic make-up is yellow, representing *adbhuta* or wonder. Other types of characters known as the *minukku*---women, Brahmins, messengers, rishis-- do not have elaborate make-up. There is only one basic make-up for them---pink on the face without any attempt to disguise the face.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid. p-44

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. p-45

#### ***d. Costume***

Kathakali has one of the most elaborate and voluminous costuming systems. Starting from head downward, the characters wear different types of headgears depending upon the types of character. These headgears called the *mudis*, are carved either from wood or cane fibre or are made of papier-mache (moulded paper pulp used for making boxes, trays, ornaments etc.).<sup>24</sup> Krishna, Lava and Kusa and other children and princes of the *sattvika* type wear a particular can-shaped crown headgear. The other good heroes (*pachcha* characters) wear a more elaborate low conical crown with a small disc, which has small mirrors. The red bearded characters wear a headgear similar to those of noble characters but the crown is higher, the disc is larger while the villains' and demons' headgears assume huge proportions to give a ferocious and imposing appearance. A distinctive headgear is designed for characters like Hanuman, Narashimha and Siva disguised as a hunter.

Going downward, the same symbolism of make up and headgear is followed in the color of the jackets worn by different types of characters. The *pachcha* (green) characters usually wear a jacket of either purple, blue or yellow colour. The red bearded characters are adorned with red ones and the white bearded with white jackets while the scarfs which hang on either side follow the color patterns set by the make up. The lower garment is a heavily plaited skirt to enlarge the actor's proportion and is common to all types of characters excepting the *minukku* characters. The various colours and styles shown in make up; headgear and jackets are to give an instant knowledge of the types of characters to the audience. The latter can identify them without any description by words. This is a high example of symbolic communication.

#### ***e. The actions***

A more intricate constituent of Kathakali than the make up system is the system of movement. The vocally silent players have to enact the whole story only with the tactful use of body movements specially hands and face. The muscles play an important part here and the movements of the facial muscles are a most significant part of a dancer's training. The dancers follow an imaginary geometrical figure (on the ground), either a square or a rectangle. The eyes follow the hand movements which, occasionally, are in the shape of eight (8). When the story demands vigour, then there are jumps, spirals, sweeps and leaps that are completely dramatic. Here the martial art comes handy. These jumps and leg extensions in sync with a given time-cycle (*tala*) constitute the *nritta* (dance) portion of Kathakali.

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid. p-46

Another important or the core constituent of Kathakali presentation is the abhinaya (acting). The *abhinaya* techniques allow the dancer to be flexible even by improvising or taking off on the sung words. Though he creates the theme in his intricate styles, he must retain the dominant mood (*bhava*) whether it is of love or humor, compassion or disgust or tranquility. Abhinaya is done through *hastas* (hand gestures) and eyes and other body movements. Hastas are the most important instruments of communication. They are rendered in sync with other micro movements of the lower limbs and the torso. Kathakali follows the 24 basic hastas of single hands and equal number (24) of combined hands. Each hasta can be used in its permutation and combination with another hasta to create the desired language. This way, kathakali's hastas have over one thousand words, which can communicate names, verbs, sentences, moods, situations, status and finally inner states of being <sup>25</sup>.

The Abhinaya is presented in three stages a. word to word synchronization, b. interpretation of the full line and c. abhinaya of the dancer following the singer. Abhinaya is not merely to interpret the words but also to add the highest aesthetic element possible. For instance, the line of poetry may only say that Bhima went through a forest; the dancer is at full liberty to present the forest in all its beauty and splendour. All this abhinaya is accompanied by dialogues and songs along with a complete percussion orchestra, which include three types of drums (*centa, maddalam and itekka*), two types of cymbals and the conch shell <sup>26</sup>. They augment the dramatic effect of the whole presentation.

### *f. The repertoire*

The traditional outdoor presentation of Kathakali is heralded with the loud beating of drums (*melapadam*). Gradually audience begins to gather in the area hearing this sound of drums. It is then, followed by devotional number called the *todayam* where one or two characters invoke the blessings of the gods. It is usually performed behind the front curtain. A pure nritta piece known as *parapadu* follows this invocation ceremony. It is purely a dance sequence without mime, performed by either hero and his consort or two other pachcha (green) characters or even the five-Pandava brothers. Then, the play or the particular scene of the play chosen for the evening begins. Very often, before any major character appears, there is slow revelation of the character from behind the curtain held by two assistants. An element of suspense is established among the audience, when the character dances, to the accompaniment of music, which is particularly seen by the audience. There appears to be a struggle between the character and the curtain. Then the character conquers the curtain and the latter disappears revealing the dancing god or demon. Beyond this point the story of Kathakali unfolds

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid. p-42

<sup>26</sup> Zarrilli, Philip. Op. cit. p-9

through *nritra* (dance), *natya*(drama) and *abhinaya* (acting). Thus Kathakali could communicate on a variety of levels with different audiences, from the highly educated to the man with little education. But its peculiarity lies in its lively theatrical presentation, which can be followed by anyone having no knowledge of the spoken language of the play.

## 6. *The chho*

Still dwelling in the phase of costumed player, let us travel from Kerala to the eastern India , West Bengal and explore an energetic tribal war dance called '*chho*'. The *chho* dance is essentially a tribal dance that acquired a Hindu veneer under the patronage of the local chieftains who had themselves only recently been sanskritised<sup>27</sup>. This dance form is popular in Purulia district of west Bengal. But culturally people of this area are identified with the unified cultural region called Jharkhand. Thematically the *Chho* is hindu which revolves round the story of Siva and their children, Ganesh and Kartikeya.

### *A. The ritual setting---*

The *chho* dance is a 'folk dance', which belongs to a non-literate tradition and is not elaborately codified. It is performed at the time of the *Siva gajan* on *caitra samkranti* in mid-April. This is a nightlong programme at the *Chaurok puja*, a major festival in honour of Siva in this region. The last day of this festival which runs for several days also include *bhaugta ghora* or 'hook swinging' rite. It is a rite when worshippers who have performed special austerities during the festival allow themselves to be pierced with hooks and are then swung from the *chaurok* pole. This is a social gathering also which is witnessed by people from other villages also. The dance performance in the night is a celebration of the successful completion of the *puja* and the return of the *bhaughtas* (devotees) to their normal lives.

The *chaurok puja* is a harbinger for the dance season, which continues for around two months from April to mid July. This is the dry season when agricultural activity is slack. The dance season ends when rain comes in mid-July.

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<sup>27</sup> Chatterji, Roma-Authenticity and Tradition-Reappraising a 'Folk' form. In Vashudha Dalmia and Heinrich Von Stietenron (ed)-Representing Hinduism-The construction of religious traditions and National identity. 1995, Sage Publication, New Delhi, p-421

## ***B. The performing arena***

The dance area is called *Asor* and is marked out with wooden posts. It is a hard, dry ground usually near the Siva temple. The surrounding area is left for the audience who struggle to come closer to the *Asor* to have a better look of the dance. The *Asor* is lighted with patromax lamps. The *machchas*, string cots hoisted on long poles, form a semi circular gallery behind the seating area on the ground. These are the poles whose fall is the measure for the intensity and success of a dance performance. When the dance becomes more exciting the audience jump up and dance vigorously so that the *machchas* behind them are shaken and fall down. This indicates a clear case of theatre arousing emotions among the audience. But, sometimes, it happens that the supporters of the dance troupe release a harmless snake among the audience and the latter begins to jump in fear which leads to the fall of the *machchas*. Another sign of the good performance is when the dust from the *Asor* begins to fly. Such actions apart, there are also other standards by which evaluations can be done. For instance, the concepts of *rasas* (sentiment, flavour), *chaal* (gait, movement), *bhongi* (style, manner), *tal* (musical time or beat) are used to beautify the performances, to portray the stories that are danced<sup>28</sup>.

## ***C. Costume***

Masks constitute main item of the costume. There are different masks for different 'gods' and players. The face, in its mask, is frozen into one expression either serene and smiling as a *Deva* or fierce, with bulging eyes and snarling lips as an *Asura*. Ganesa has an elephant head mask with halo around it, decorated with the tinsel beads and small plastic flowers. *Nandi* and *Bhrngi*, Siva's two servants and comic characters in the play, wear grotesque masks. An average mask weighs approximately 2 kg. Four holes are pierced in the mask, two for the dancer to see and two for him to breathe. This helps the dancer do the jumps and spins without getting breathless. Other than the masks the characters wear zari-encrusted clothes. In one scene kartikeya wears peacock feathers on his mask and shirt. This way, the chho dancers use minimum costume to enhance the vigorous movements.

## ***D. The performance***

The performance starts by 11 o'clock in the night and goes on till daybreak. A dance programme usually has two rival troupes who try to outdo each other and create a strong dramatic

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid. p-424

element, which the audience enjoys. The arrival of the troupes is announced by the frenzied sound of drums and the wailing wind instruments. The players hold the masks aloft and quiver them. The musicians of each troupe take rounds of the Asor, the performing arena to create the required excitement for the dance programme which follows. The musical instruments include the dhol— a barrel shaped drum played with the palm of the left hand and a stick in the right hand. There is a conversation between the dancers and the *dhol*. Then, there is *dhaumsa* or *nagra*, a huge bowl-shaped kettle drum played with two heavy blunt sticks. The *saina* or *sahnai* gives a high wailing sound. Sometimes *kournet* or clarinet and *bansi* or flute are played to add a piece of melody.

When the *dhaumsa* and *saina* players have settled down on one side of the arena, the singer makes an entry and sings a special *jhumur* welcoming the audience. Then it is followed by *Ganesa vandana*, an invocation to *Ganesa*. By this time *Ganesa* has already taken his position at the entrance, half crouched, one leg extended, shoulders quivering expectantly. Then the *Ganesa* enters crouching and moving his head to display his elephant head mask in the beats of the *dhol*. Then he does a few *degs*- a series of jumps that end in the crouched position with the right leg extended. After a slow movement he makes high leaps and then walks in *bir chaal* (the heroic gait). Each time the dancer completes a particular sequence of steps, the *dhol* stops and the players shout 'chhau'.

After *Ganesa* has completed his stint, his brother *Kartikeya* takes over the limelight. The latter as befitting the commander-in-chief of the gods' army enters in a burst of peacock feathers. His dance is more vigorous than that of *Ganesa*. After showing his skill of dance, *Kartikeya* makes way for other characters. Then a loud roll of drumbeats announces *Siva's* entrance. He adopts the *nataraja* position with *trisula* in one hand. His dance consists of sudden movements, which then swing back into immobility. Then *Siva* retires to Mount *Kailasa* after instructing *Ganesa* to stand guard. His two servants *Nandi* and *Bhrngi* also help *Ganesa* in guarding lord *Siva*. These two characters provide humorous movements with their grotesque masks and splay-footed gait, swinging their hips like puppets.

After a short pause, there is another drumbeat anticipating the entrance of *Parsurama*. He enters non-chalant and makes a mocking gesture at *Nandi* and *Bhrngi* who try to adopt menacing postures. He pushes them scornfully. Then the real battle starts when *Ganesa* enters the *Asor*. The *dhaumsa* creates wild war beats preparing the stage for a face-off between *Parsurama* and *Ganesa*. Both of them make many leaps (*ulfa*), which threaten almost to break through the boundaries of the *Asor*. Then *Parsurama* defeats *Ganesa* and then *Kartikeya* who comes in to help his brother. Hearing the war drums *Durga* enters with her *vahana* (vehicle, the lion), followed by *Siva*. Here a comic overtone is provided when *Nandi* and *Bhrngi* pull the lion's tail and lion pounces on them. Then the battle comes to a close when *Parsurama* succeeds in his mission to get a *darsan* (audience) of his



lord-Siva. After this all the characters come together and shake hands and then the dancers perform *Mel chho*- a dance to celebrate the peace.

Chho dance is not merely presenting the story of the text but to present the images with the help of music. The presentation is carried out by the gestures of the hands, legs and torso, as the face is covered by the mask which gives only a fixed appearance. These movements require grace and agility on the part of the players. If they perform outstandingly they get applause and money as well which the audience pin on their costumes time to time. So, the chho dance carries in it the essence of theatre—the arousal of the excitement among the spectators.

## **7. The Tibetan festival drama**

The Tibetan festival drama <sup>29</sup> is a theatrical performance which has scripts with religious themes. These festival dramas are performed in August-September and the site of the performance is a vast plain in the Tibetan mountains. This festival is a five day long affair, which serves as a social event in which people from different villages come and enjoy the drama and social ambience. This festival drama takes place in a formation very similar to the circle of the Marshfield mummers but of greatly increased dimensions.

The performing arena is a circular one around whose circumference the spectators gather before the performance begins. The rich people establish camps with their tents around the circumference and stock the article of comforts, as these will be their homes for the five days. They watch the drama from their tents unlike the poorer people who commute daily from their homes to the performing site and back. The size of the acting area is between 100 ft and 200 ft. long and somewhat less across. In performance in *Batang*, south eastern Tibet, near one end of the festival ground stands a substantial two storey building where a representative of the monastery stays during the festival and in which the considerable wardrobe of costume is kept and where the players dress.

Two elongated canopies occupy the middle of the performing arena. These are made out of two richly patterned awning--clothes, put end-to-end so as to form a long tent roof and held up on three tall king poles, one each at either end and one in the middle between the two clothes. The poles are supported and the clothes held out, by long guy ropes made off on tent pegs in the ground. The two halves covered by the clothes have different theatrical functions. The eastern half has a small growing tree at the centre which also serves as the focal point for the dancers. Otherwise it does not have other props. The end of eastern half has a roofed chair on which is placed a figure of the holy

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<sup>29</sup> Southern, Richard. Op.cit p-90

man, *Druhtoh Thangthang* who was invited from India by the Tibetans to institute a new age in their country. The area between this figure and the centre pole is laid with cushions, seats and tables used in the presentation of interior scenes in the plays.

Costume of these dances is simpler as compared to the advanced theatre of phase one for instance Kathakali. Though important characters wear more elaborate costumes the smaller characters wear ordinary gown. There is normal make-up. There is disappearance of elaborate use of masks, which are, here, worn by some characters only such as sorcerers and spirits. One important entrant in this phase of theatre is the introduction of human beings in the plays unlike the previous phases, which have gods, demons, animals etc. There is often symbolic use of clothes. The players do not change their costumes to portray a different mood. Instead a piece of costume is added over the one, which the player is wearing. For instance, an exiled prince will have a sombre cloak thrown over his yellow gown or when robbers attack a party they push and cuff the victims whose clothes are not torn off but merely changed by throwing a grey robe and grey skull cap over their apparel.

Following their acting style, it is a mixture of recitation, dancing and narrative. The scripts of the plays invariably have passages meant for the actors to speak on the stage and passages of narration meant for the commentators. The dancing forms the chief part of the display and is accompanied by cymbal and drum in a complication of rhythm. The instruments cease before any chanted passage. The recitation by the actors is delivered in the form of poetry written in the classical Tibetan. It is done in a rapid, unintelligible tone, beginning and ending in a high-pitched cry. These words are not supposed to be understood by the audience. The latter follow the recitation through the pantomimic movements of the actors. But the real theatrical reply is aroused by the short comic interludes belted out in the local dialect. These interludes are replete with coarse jokes caricaturing the home life with wit and puns, which release an ocean of laughter among the audience. These, sometimes, lead to the invasion of the performing arena by this excited audience, which is prevented by the organizers of the play. This shows the permeability of the audience to move around, take part in the action or to be away from these actions or to be indifferent. This is a characteristic of these traditional theatres.

The acting delivery is not naturalistic and is given on a single note, or chanted swiftly, but it does permit a good deal of emotional expression and is capable of inspiring an audience to tears or to laughter. The acting in this Tibetan festival drama is now assisted with 'scenic property' instead of entirely enacting the story with body gestures like in Kathakali. Such properties are the objects themselves or conventional substitutes – a mixture of realism and fancy. A house is symbolically represented by a staked square enclosed by red cloth. A forest consists of green tree branches stuck into the ground and when some of the branches are tied into the shape of a hut, it is the hermitage of

anchorite. There are many such examples of imaginary presentation of the real world. One part, which is quite realistic, is the religious exorcism, when the exorcist, sitting on a rug in rope-enclosed space, mutters charms, rings bell and manipulates his hands and fingers in the prescribed motions. The Tibetan festival drama is a clear example of ritual developing into theatre with addition of human beings and secular elements to entertain the people.

## **8. The Medieval rounds**

The Medieval rounds are a form of theatre almost similar to the Tibetan festival drama<sup>30</sup>. This development took place about the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries in Western Europe. The structure of the drama i.e., the organization of the properties in the performing area is quite like that of Tibetan festival drama that a medieval Englishman or Frenchman would probably feel at home among the audience at Batang where the Tibetan festival drama is held. The scripts of the plays were mostly religious and it was mainly to spread the new religion (Christianity) in both England and France.

The essential element of a round is the central plain, which is surrounded either by simple fencing or by earthen mounds. In England this plain is called *place*, a derivative from the Latin *platea* (which is anglicized into *Placea* and then to *place*). So, to be 'in the place', then, meant in medieval theatrical parlance to be in this central plain. Like that in Tibetan drama, the parameter of the plain had tents which were meant both for the spectators and the players. These tents were higher structures with a wooden framework and highly raised floor at about eight feet above the ground. Though the play is mainly performed in the central space of the plain, the players use some of the tents as stage so that they may be seen clearly by the greater crowd of thousands.

The preparations of this central plain can be of two types. *Firstly*, if the ground is hard, the whole circle is barricaded with a fence and the scaffolds (the tents) are built inside against this fence. Spectators use some of these; otherwise, the spectators sit or stand on the ground in front of the scaffolds and along the edge of the place itself. *Secondly*, if the ground is soft, a huge circular mound of earth is raised round the place, leaving the hole from which the earth comes as a circular ditch skirting all which is filled with water. The mound and the water around it serve as a fort preventing any gatecrasher. The inner side of this mound serves as an excellent grandstand to accommodate the audience. This reduces the need for scaffolds for the audience. On such arrangement the scaffolds for the actors are built on the summit of the mound with a staircase. They number around five in five possible sides of the central plain.

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid. p-98

When the crowd is huge and strong, they may encroach the central performing space. So, to prevent such crowding monitors, called '*styteler*' or '*Stightler*' are put into service. They guard the actors and clear a passage when they move to the central space for the concerted performance or to other scaffold to perform with the actors of that particular scaffold.

The main central performing space has a scenic object like that of Tibetan drama, but it is not the great awning but a skeleton which serves as a church or a chapel or a castle according to the need of the play. This is a raised structure having four legs and a ladder by which the players climb to perform on the floor of this raised stage. One other element which is used in this theatre is the curtain in front of the peripheral scaffolds which is drawn by a cord. This helps the actors hide or show themselves when demanded by the play.

The entry by the audience inside the circle is by a gate through the hill and by a bridge over the ditch. The actors have a different style of entry. After dressing in their costumes in a pavilion outside the 'place' they mount the hill from the entrance and walk on the rampart behind the spectators and slip through the back curtain of their scaffolds. If the character is a peculiar one who represents something of the other world such as death, he comes through the gate of the audience and stride into the crowded place down a lane cleared by the *stytelers*.

Now, the scripts of the plays have different kinds of themes. Some are purely religious epic cycles<sup>31</sup>. Some are almost free-thinking, philosophical conceptions of the problems of life; some are normal English Mystery cycles; some are saint's plays; some are sensational plays which have stunts and horror. Also, there are large, bland, shrewd comments on current corruption. Some of them have quite superb poetry and startling subtle scenes of human psychology. The actor's conventional costumes fit for the characters they portray. Their individual speeches are also conventional. There is also space for the dance during the performance. Music serves as an accompaniment to the performance to give a powerful effect. This way these plays presented in the round system give the spectators entertainment and information of the religion and day to-day happenings around them.

## **9. Early Noh (NŌ) of Japan**

Noh is a form of musical dance drama originating in the 14<sup>th</sup> century<sup>32</sup> Japan. The early Noh are performed in the outdoor like any other theatre of this second phase of theatrical development. It has a rich use of mask, music, dance and narration. Language is largely poetic. Costumes are rich and heavy; movement, even in dance, deliberate. The performance looks and sounds more like solemn

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid. p-102

<sup>32</sup> Kodansha-Encyclopedia of Japan, Vol. 6, p-32

observance than life. The plays are basically of two kinds – those dealing with ‘real people’ and those dealing with supernatural beings. Both reflect the common Buddhist view of life. With no artifice of stage craft, in strict rhythm (out of music, voice and movement), time and space are created and destroyed.

Noh literally means ‘skill’ or ‘accomplishment’. It is a professional theatre in the sense that the performers have undergone exacting training but no actor makes a living by performing. At the middle of the 14th century, the actors organized troupes under the patronage of *Shinto* (an indigenous religion of Japan) shrines and Buddhist temples. Their performances at religious festivals at home and on tour propagated doctrine and also entertained people. There are different types of Noh such as subscription or public Noh, performed in open air, as opposed to performances in temples or at the house of nobles, *Dengaku* (field music) Noh, derived from ancient religious rice planting and harvesting rituals and *sarugaku* (monkey music) Noh which has acrobatics, juggling, magic, sword swallowing etc. as its elements. The pioneers of Noh were father and son combination of *Kanami* (1338-84) and *Zeami* (1364-1443)<sup>33</sup> who mixed up ritual elements with theatrical fervour quite flawlessly. Kanami was a performer of *sarugaku* Noh, which while retaining its centuries old character as variety show had gradually been developing simple playlets. Kanami gave them form by inserting a dance known as *Kusemei*, which had a strong beat, and an accompanying sung narrative. He built the central climaxes of his performances around this *Kusemei* dance and then they developed into a well-accomplished theatre. In order to reduce the seriousness created by the religious performance, an interlude called *Kyogen*(crazy words) which is a comic piece is played between serious presentations.

#### a. *Performing area*

Early Noh is mostly performed in open-air. The performing open-air auditorium is surrounded by raised boxes (possibly in more than one storey) built in the perimeter of the circle of some 100ft in diameter<sup>34</sup>. These boxes serve to accommodate people of rank away from the crowd and also to shut off the performance from the view of anyone outside the theatre. The main acting area or stage is set in the middle of the arena (auditorium). The access to this stage is by a bridge which connects the stage with the mirror room or dressing room. The bridge is built-in a curving arch, like a hump-back bridge. The bridge is not just an entrance but has a ritual dimension too. It is the dimension in which both the world of gods and the world of men can touch. The acting area has places for different people such as

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<sup>33</sup> Bowring, Richard and Kornicki, Peter-The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Japan. 1993, Cambridge University Press, p-221

<sup>34</sup> Southern, Richard. Op. cit. p-34

musicians (*hayashikata*), stage assistants (*koken*), members of the chorus (*jintai*), Comedians etc. The main stage has no props on which the actors can depend. This space can be used in most theatrical way. The space, besides being used realistically, can also be transmuted in the sense that a huge ground or distance can be created sheerly out of body movements and gestures. For instance, when an actor moves 10 meters or so in actual space, his journey is increased to hundreds of miles in the lyric description of travel called *michiyuku*. Likewise time can be altered in similar fashion –speeded up, slowed, stopped<sup>35</sup>. Like time and space, a stick can be transformed into huge tree only by theatrical considerations.

#### b. *Performers*

All the performers of Noh are male. There are different schools for training the characters such as the *shite* (the principal actor), his companion (*tsure*), the child actor (*kokata*), the chorus, the stage assistants, the *waki* (subordinate actor) etc. Each instrument--- the flute, small hand drum (*kotsu zumi*), large hand drum (*otsuzumi*) and large drum (*taiko*) standing on the floor--- is taught in a number of different schools. The training of the characters includes both vocal and physical exercises. The student is taught a role step by step. Each unit, in which the heel never leaves the floor, is a *Kata*. The movements are slow and graceful.

#### c. *Properties*

Actor has some properties to enhance his expressions. They include letters, umbrellas, rosaries, the bamboo branch and most importantly the folding fan (*chukei*) which depending upon the *kata*, is variable. Closed, partly closed, open, the fan may represent any object suggested by its shape and handling--- dagger, Lantern, rising moon. The abstract or pictorial designs painted on these fans are conventionally associated with a type of character-ghost, old women, demon and so on. But its use is confined only to the *shite* and *waki*.

#### d. *Costume*

The ordinary costumes of Noh are the plain silk clothes worn in everyday life. The clothes are never shabby and untidy. All are meant to give an effect of luxurious elegance. A poor, mad, old woman may be dressed in sober colors, but she is silken not shabby. Costume is designed to give a bulky, massive figure which is effected by at least five layers of clothing, one a padded

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<sup>35</sup> Kodansha. Op. cit. p-25

undergarment, the outmost richly figured damask (silk material), brocade or embroidered silk gauze<sup>36</sup>. No garment completely conceals the one beneath its surface and textures are multiple. Sleeves are wide so that gesture tells. Characters who need correct proportional height wear wigs, hats and headdresses. Male characters may wear boxing trousers or long ones that trail behind them.

e. *Masks*

Noh performances make use of wooden masks, which are painted. There are different types of masks meant for holy old men, gods and demons, old men, spirits, men and women. The Shite (the principal character) chooses his mask to match his costume. Only shite and his companions are masked as long as they do not represent living men and women. Before wearing a mask, an actor studies it, in the mirror room, to be able to use light, shadow and angle to best effect. Then the mask is placed on his face (partly covering the face), held there by silk cords knotted behind his head. After wearing it the actor loses his own personality and resumes the personality of the character he is essaying.

f. *Plays*

The plays performed in Noh can be broadly divided into five groups<sup>37</sup>. *Firstly* God plays in which the deity appears first as a human being and later in his true form. The gods are various, ranging from sea-dragons to pine trees and plum blossoms. *Secondly*, there are plays called *shura-mono*, which concern the ghosts of warriors condemned to eternal battles. The ghosts approach a priest whose prayer release them from suffering. *Thirdly* there are wig (*kazura*) plays, which usually have women or female spirits who are enacted by shite (the principle character). These characters are obsessed with love and its consequences. The 4<sup>th</sup> group has largest number of plays and are realistic and deal with present day events. Here the shite is often a woman deranged by loss of lover or child. The fifth and last group is called final (*Kiri*) or demon (*kichiku*) Plays, which have powerful non-human creatures, good and evil who dance vigorously. In such plays, one thing, which is peculiar and also realistic, is that good does not always triumph but it is never overwhelmed.

The play texts are short. Most would take only 15 minutes to read aloud at normal speed. They are both prose (*kotoba*) and poetry (*utai*) which are sung or declaimed by actors and chorus in the accompaniment of music. A play is considered attractive if it follows three elements. First, the choice of a subject is often from earlier literature and always familiar to an educated audience. Second, the structure has to follow a fundamental pattern *jo* (introduction), *ha* (development) and *kyu* (climax).

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid, p-26

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. p-27

Third, the literary style has to be elegant and poetic. Some western scholars claim that the Noh plays are literature in itself, which can be enjoyed by merely reading them without the need of performance. But a majority of Japanese scholars prefer to differ. The premise of their argument is that the parts of the plays are unintelligible unless performed, that the total expression of the play cannot be revealed without movement and music. This shows how Noh plays are theatrical rather than literary.

g. *Performance*

A full performance in theater festival in early Noh contains three or five separate Noh plays<sup>38</sup>, carefully chosen to give a developing dramatic effect and two or three *kyogen* (comic short plays) interspersed between them for relief. All the plays have a three part structure—*Jo* (introduction), *ha* (exposition) and *kyu* (climax or a rapid finale). *Ha* has three sections<sup>39</sup>.

- a. *Jo*: entry of secondary figure (*waki*), usually a priest and a stranger who announces the setting—seasons, place or the central theme of the play.
- b. *Ha I.*: entry of the main figure (*shite*) singing *essei* (first song) whose material is general landscape, season, his employment or present identity.
- c. *Ha II*: the *waki*, a stranger, asks the *shite*, apparently a local person, about the historical associations of the setting.
- d. *Ha III*: the *shite* reveals close knowledge of the place in a dance (*kuse*), which ends the first part of the play.
- e. In the *kyu*, the *shite* reappears after changing his costume, in his real identity as a historical figure linked to the setting and portrays in a dance, the incident that created the link.

*Kyogen*, which is played between Noh plays, is an independent comic piece in which players would talk to the audience in everyday language.

The Noh plays are still alive among the Japanese. All sorts of people practice Noh chanting and privately demonstrate this ability to their friends' admiration. Noh plays give importance to silence and immobility. It is *Ma*, a basic Japanese aesthetic concept that sound can exist only against the vitality of silence, that movement takes meaningful form only in a field of stillness. So, the players are acting still in the 'motionless activity'. So, it has this ritual element still intact and this certifies the performance itself as a ceremonial art.

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<sup>38</sup> Southern, Richard. op. cit. p-114

<sup>39</sup> Bowring, Richard and Kornicki, Peter. Op. cit. p-222



## 10. Ramlila

Now let us come back to North India and delve in one of the most popular religious performances of the Hindus called Ramlila. The Ramlila is one of the finest examples of ritual carrying the theatrical essence. It is still in the second phase of theatrical development, for it has religious theme, has a raised stage, performed outdoor, to mention a few characteristics. The Ramlila is the enactment of important episodes from the great Hindu epic-the Ramayana. It is performed during *Dushahara*, a festival which celebrates the triumph of the lord Rama against Ravana of Lanka, which mostly falls in September or October. It has been serving the people of Northern India for more than two centuries now with its religious fervor. The text which is followed in the performance is Tulsidas's *Ramcharitamanasa*. Though almost every locality or village organizes Ramlila during this festival season, the Ramlila at *Ramnagar* stands apart in its grandeur. It is not just a simple performance but also a destination for pilgrimage for the lakhs of Hindus from the neighbouring villages and also from far-off places. It has been a subject of study for generations of scholars for its extraordinary arrangement of performing spaces, matchlessly long period of performance, merging of this-worldly and otherworldly beings, the structure of audience and lot more. One of the most vivid descriptions of Ramlila at Ramnagar is seen in *Anuradha Kapur's* article-Actors, pilgrims, kings and gods: the Ramlila at Ramnagar (1983).

Let us now unfold the Ramlila at Ramnagar. Starting with geography, Ramnagar, near Banaras, is a town of about 4.25 square kilometers in area, situated on the left bank of the Ganga. The Ramlila at this town spreads for an extraordinarily long period of 30 or 31 days depending on the lunar calendar<sup>40</sup>. Its performance style is a combination of the wordless tableaux, the jhanki and processional drama (like the British Mummers' play) where actors move from one place to another place (followed by the audience) and exchange dialogues. The style of dialogue delivery by the actors (gods) is not realistic in the conventinal sense of the theater but in a singsong manner.

Unlike many Ramlilas in other parts of India, the Ramlila at Ramnagar is not confined in only one place for the whole performance. The locations over which the Lila moves are spread over an area of about 2.6 square kilometers. Here, the important places associated with the Ramayana are recreated and relived. This is a perfect example of transformation of 'there and then' to 'here and now'. Ramnagar truly lives up to its name (Ram-Nagar-Ram's city). In order to adapt the Ramayana in real sense, some locations are specially created such as the pavilions at Pravarshana Mountain, and at

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<sup>40</sup> Kapur, Anuradha-Actors, Pilgrims, Kings and Gods: the Ramlila at Ramnagar. 1985, Contributions to Indian Sociology. Vol. 19, No. 1, p-59

Panchavati and some are part of the town's landmarks, like the temple and the Rambagh. This means most of the locations in Ramnagar come within Lila's great boundary.

The preparation for staging this performance is as lengthy and elaborate as the performance itself. For a successful performance, the preparation takes around a year--- from building of effigies to selection of actors to the training of them. Around 40-50 Brahman boys are called for audition by the Maharaja of Banaras by July, for the roles of *swarupas* (main characters)--- *Rama, Lakshman, Bharata, Shatrugana and Janaki*. These swarupas are all Brahman children between the age group of 8-13 years. After the selection, the boys are initiated into their roles and after a special Ganesa Puja, they will be known as the characters they are going to essay --Rama, Lakshman, Janaki etc.- not by their real names. This is a theatrical transformation when the swarupas eat, sleep, speak, walk, bless like the gods in the epic. This way they also receive respect from the people befitting to the gods. So, by July, the divine presence is already considered to have graced Ramnagar because two months before the performance gods are believed to be dwelling in the swarupas. Apart from swarupas there are many roles, which are hereditary. For instance, the role of Ravana has been played by a family for generations. So is the same in case of the roles of Vishvamitra, Hanuman, Jatayu and Janaka. Other roles like that of Kaushalya and the queens and the demon and the monkey armies are by children recruited every year.

### *The text enacted*

The Ramcharitamanasa, the text for the Ramlila, is divided into two parts-one, which is dramatic and needs to be enacted and sung and others, which are less dramatic and needs only to be sung. The part, which is acted, is repeated twice- once as it is by the *Ramayanis* and once it is spoken by the actors.

In performance the text is open to three possibilities --seeing, hearing and reading. The Maharaja has the privilege to enjoy all the three i.e., he reads the Ramcharitamanasa, which he carries with him, hears the Ramayanis who sit at the feet of his elephant and sees the performance from the top of his elephant. This privilege cannot be enjoyed by all the spectators. There are so many people who cannot even have a glimpse of what is happening on the stage as they are too far away from the stage due to large congregation of people. So, they sit nearby the Ramayanis and listen to the text and hearing in itself is a form of worship.<sup>41</sup> According to Anuradha kapur, there are three kinds of timing in dramatic performances which she applies to Ramlila also. First and most important, is the *plot time*, the time of one specific plot. The plot time is the structure of the play itself; what it chooses to show

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid. p-62

and report and what it presents in flashback as reflection. Second is the *chronological time*, which is the actual sequence of events. For instance, the scene of morning works in a house can be shown before the scene of the work in office etc. Third, there is constant 'now' of the play where everything that is shown appears to be always in the present.

The chronological time in the performance is the same as in the text, but not the plot time. The later is extended in the performance. The plot time in the Ramlila is the time for moving from location to another location to suit the description of the text. Tulsidas may have a brief mention of the journey but the actual performance may stretch the journey for hours. The extension of plot time is seen in Bharata Milapa episode. For instance, on the 29<sup>th</sup> day of the Ramlila, Bharata has been informed of Rama's impending arrival at 7.30 pm in the evening; but the actual arrival takes place only at 11pm. It may be a long wait for a stranger but for the ones who have been waiting for this moment, it is not wastage of time. This plot has been playing in their minds and it is worth waiting with devotion. The drama unfolds slowly tantalising the audience. The drama has been deliberately done in order to arouse the curiosity amongst the spectators to see their gods in action. So, this particular event is made up of action, devotion, flares and suspenses, which acquire a meaning that is quite separate from the text itself.

### *The performing space*

Ramlila at Ramnagar transforms the whole town into theatre space. Its building, lanes, grounds, trees, ponds all become part of this space. As mentioned elsewhere, the Ramlila here is a processional theatre where the audience follows the performance. This means the gods, the demons and spectators move from place to place when the story demands. Among the places where Rama, along with the spectators, visits are Ayodhya, Janakpur, Pampasar, Kishkindha, Panchavati, Suvela Giri, Rameshvara and Lanka<sup>42</sup>. These are the places built at Ramnagar.

The Ramlila, here, is very realistic where the Ramayana is recreated here and now before the audience with all the real ambiances. So, when a city is to be shown, for instance, Janakpur and Ayodhya, locations and the main streets of Ramnagar are selected. This way fields are converted into battlegrounds, ponds and lakes of Ramnagar become ponds and lakes of the Ramayana. When Rama is in exile, the spectators follow him through mud and sludge and they are also in exile and as he moves further and further away from Ayodhya, they move further and further away from the centre. So, Lanka is the farthest place from Ayodhya, which is three kilometers from the center of Ramnagar town. These locations are all both realistic and suggestive. In other words, while the locations create Rama's

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid. p-64

landscape in miniature, they also become a metaphor for it. There is layer-by-layer transformation of Ramnagar. First the whole town is transformed into a theatre space, then into epic space and then finally into a sacred space where Rama lives. So, the whole town becomes a space for pilgrimage.

### ***The actors***

The swarupas in the Ramlila at Ramnagar are gods in flesh and blood. They become gods not because they perform well like gods or they are transformed into the character they carry for the time being but because they adhere to the tradition which their predecessors did in the last edition of the Ramlila here at Ramnagar. No dramatic skill, no originality on the part of a swarupa is highly encouraged. What the audience wants is that the swarupas must continue without pause what others have begun before him. The spectators never complain whether the swarupas act well or not. Each time they are as beautiful, as competent and as compelling as they had been in the previous years.

The relations between the swarupas and the character they carry can be well explained with the concept of '*Patra*'. *Patra* means both 'vessel' and 'actor'. In Ramlila a swarupa is not a portrait of the god. The swarupa is a vessel, which contains the qualities of the character. This is how the audience views the actor and how the actor views himself. This way the actor conveys those qualities to the audience like a vessel conveys wine to the drinker. Like the taste of the wine does not exist in the vessel, the qualities of the character are not acquired by the actor. Otherwise, the surest way of experiencing god would be to, simply, play his role.

Why the audience does not complain against the acting of the actors is because of the reflexivity in seeing. There is broadening of horizon in the minds of the spectators, as they go beyond what is presented by the captors. Here, reflexivity is seeing what is shown, also seeing what is not to see some shown things as well. This means the audience is well prepared to enjoy the Ramlila irrespective of whether the show is spectators or not. For them gods are gods, gods does not commit any mistake. So, they worship the swarupas who are the vessels of the gods.

### ***The make-up***

The Ramlila shows a connection between this-worldly beings and other-worldly beings. The swarupas stand between these two areas. They are both icons and actors. In order to appear otherworldly, the swarupa has to shed his own personality and take the form of the icon he represents. This is done with the help of make-up. The swarupas' faces are ornately decorated with gold, silver and red discs forming half moon patterns on their cheeks and brows. Also, they have sandalwood dots

and lines on their faces and on their limbs. All these spots shine and sparkle every time the actor makes a movement. Again the sweat of the swarupas add to the glow of the discs on their faces.

### ***The arati***

The arati marks the end of every evening's performance. This is the actual time when the swarupas become icons. They are frozen like the temple icons so that people may worship them. This way the evening of journeys and shifts is brought to a standstill. The fierce blaze of the pink and white mehatabis that are lit while the arati is being performed is splendidly effective in arresting the moments enhancing the stillness of the swarupas. This gives a golden chance to the audience to adore their gods. In these moments swarupas cease to be actors and become the icons.

The swarupas are displayed to the audience in another way also by carrying them on the shoulders through the crowd. It is because, they cannot touch the ground, as they have become gods. This displaying is also a gesture from the gods' side to bless the crowd who are eager to have a close look at their icons. When they are about to perch on the shoulders of the devotees who volunteered to carry them, a deafening frenzy engulfs the town. Then the swarupas are lifted on the shoulders of their devotees. The former sit lightly on the shoulders while the carriers, the devotees, hold them carefully as if they are transporting clay images<sup>43</sup>. They carry swords in red scabbards with which they skin the heads of their spectators and ride away through the crowd. The swarupas remain always composed despite the jostle of the crowd. In fact, they are the images of the tranquil divine.

### ***The maharaja as king, as god and as actor***

The maharaja of Banaras is visibly a king with his large entourage during the performance of Ramlila. He is not only a king but also the *pratika* (symbol pointer, representative) of Siva, the patron deity of the city. Both as a king and the representative of Shiva, the maharaja has very special privileges. First, the Lila cannot start if he or any of his family members does not come at the performance site. Second he and his chosen guests have the privilege to witness the whole performance from the top of the elephants. Most importantly, he can interrupt the performance in between when he goes back for *Sandhya Puja* (evening prayer). Normally a performance can be stopped when an actor is absent from the performing site. This means, the Maharaja has an important part to play (as an actor) in the Ramlila. The Maharaja is seen as god at par with Rama. This can be

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid. p-67

seen on *Dushahara*, the 20<sup>th</sup> day of Ramlila at Ramnagar. He is clad in splendid finery, is surrounded by priests, family members and attendants during the *Shashtra Puja* in the after noon. The crowd gathered on his courtyard, see Rama in him. Then, there starts a procession, followed by the crowd, from his courtyard to Lanka to fight Ravana. This way he becomes an ally of Rama in the battle against Ravana. This means, the Maharaja is now seen as a contemporary of Rama and becomes an other-worldly figure. On the other hand it can be claimed that the maharaja brings the Lila into the place, which is his own kingdom. So, the Maharaja is also an actor by taking part in the procession like any other swarupas and at the same time he is the king of Banaras.

Another example of the king becoming an actor is seen on the last day (31<sup>st</sup> Day) of the Lila. In the evening the swarupas at Ayodhya are invited by the Maharaja to his fort. The swarupas come on the king's elephants while the Maharaja is bare foot and simply dressed on this day. The guests are recieved by him and his family members and then the Maharaja washes the feet of the swarupas. He then applies *tilak* on the foreheads of the swarupas and does the arati. This way he has become a player in the Lila like any other actor. The guests are served with a great feast, which they take slowly and with superb self-possession. While they relish the feast, the Ramayanis softly recite whatever is left of the Ramcharitamanasa. The Lila cannot end till the whole text has been read. The whole Ramlila ends with the presenting of token payments to the actors by the Maharaja, though the swarupas are paid the next day in private. The Maharaja garlands the swarupas and then does arti. Then he takes back those garlands from the swarupas with bowed head. After this is over, the swarupas set off on their elephants while the Maharaja and his family retire into the palace.

There are so many meanings laced in this part played by the Maharaja. It is right to quote Anuradha Kapur<sup>44</sup>. " An actor, king and god is being received by a king, the symbol of god and an actor. Within one evening, the Maharaja pays tribute to the gods like all the devotees in Ramnagar would like to do but cannot since they are not royalty; he sanctifies his own home by having the swarupas enter it; he achieves contemporaneity with the gods by stepping directly into their Lila; and he completes his duties as a patron by rewarding his performers. Over and above all that, he reclaims his ground as the Maharaja".

The whole process in Ramlila at Ramnagar is a pilgrimage for the spectators. The whole town is sanctified by the journey of the gods. The spectators become part of the journey of Rama and also part of happiness and worries of Rama. This way a spectator become an Ayodhyawasi, a Janakpurwasi and a visitor to Lanka as the occasion demands. So, the Ramlila is a perfect example of processional theatre which, at the same time a maintains the nuances of the second phase of theatrical development.

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid. p-70

All the traditional theatres of the first and second phases, studied above, from the Bavarian wild men to Kathakali to Ramlila, share common characteristics i.e., the outdoor performance and proximity to the audience. All this will help understand Shumang Lila of Manipur properly. This may serve as a prelude to the main body called Shumang Lila.

# **CHAPTER -3**



# **THE MANIPURI SOCIETY FROM**

## **HISTORICO-POLITICO-RELIGIOUS**

### **PERSPECTIVES**

The present state of Manipur is in the easternmost frontier of Indian nation. It has a territorial area of 22,327 sq-km out of which only one tenth is the plain areas. It has a bowl shaped valley surrounded by mountains from all sides. The hills are inhabited by tribal people under the major group of the Kuki and the Naga. The valley is inhabited mostly by the Meiteis who are the majority people and the Pangans (Muslims) etc. The Manipur valley has been described by C.J. Lyall<sup>1</sup> as “ .....singular oasis of comparative civilization and organized society, set in the midst of a congeries of barbarous peoples.....” The valley is densely populated, highly fertile and has advanced technology and better social and economic organizations which all led to the growth of kingdoms and principalities while in the hills the political systems could not develop beyond the village society or village republics<sup>2</sup> because of the geographical location. In this chapter I will be confining myself only to the valley society of Manipur, mainly that of the Meitei and other ethnic groups who come under the Meitei fold. This will help the reader in understanding the next chapter i.e. Chapter 4.

#### **ORIGIN OF THE MEITEIS**

The origin of the Meitei is shrouded in controversies. There have been many theories and conjectures, which claim themselves to be true. All this is due to the lack of valid historical and archeological evidences. There are three popular theories, which are manufactured in the idiosyncratic factories of self-proclaimed scholars on the Manipuri Civilization. The first theory propagates the Aryan connection of the Meiteis. The second asserts that the Meiteis originated on the Koubru peak in the North-West of Manipur. The third is the one, which came out of the study

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<sup>1</sup> Hodson, T. C. – The Meitheids, 1968, Low Price Publication, Delhi. Introduction.

<sup>2</sup> Kabui, Gangmumei – Glimpses of Land and People of Ancient Manipur. In Naorem Sanajaoba (ed). – Manipur – Past and Present. Vol. I., 1988, Mittal Publications. Pp. 8-9

of the ethnonym 'Meitei' itself. Whatever be their claims, we need to have a patient hearing of their contradicting voices.

The Aryan card of the Meiteis' origin is enthusiastically played by such writers as R. K. Jhaljit Singh<sup>3</sup>. He goes to the extent of saying that Manipur has always been a part of India. According to him the Meiteis are the descendants of *Babhruvahana*, the son of Arjun and Chitrangada of Mahabharata. He confidently asserts that *Manipura* mentioned in Adi Parva (when Arjun went from Hiranyavindu to Mahendra mountains and then to Manipura where he married Chitrangada, the Princess of that kingdom), Ashwamedha Parva (when the sacrificial horse followed by Arjun is stopped by Babhruvahana and there is a fight between the father and the son) and Mahaprasthanika Parva (when the five brothers and Draupadi leave the capital with a dog towards heaven in flesh and blood and Chitrangada returns to Manipur city) is the Manipur of today. The explanation given to justify this claim is that Manipura of Mahabharata is in the Eastern frontier of the whole earth bounded by the ocean. Again there is the propagation of a royal genealogy, which connects Pakhangba, the first king (recorded in history) as the son of Sooprabahoo who is again a son of Babhruvahana. This theory is rejected by many scholars only as a myth. Many English and Indian scholars did not support this and located Manipura of Mahabharata in or around Kalinga in Orissa which is in the Eastern frontier at sea coast. This is seen as an aspect of Sanskritisation and as an attempt to gain recognition and respectability in the Hindu world<sup>4</sup>. Sir Edward Gait maintains that the Aryan connection of the Meiteis is a legend invented by *degraded Brahmans* who serve the Manipuris<sup>5</sup>. A determined group of non-Brahminical Meitei scholars forcefully and convincingly argue that the name 'Manipur' is a hinduised name which came around early eighteenth century when Hinduism was adopted by the Royal family. The purport of this claim is that the original name of the kingdom is *Kangleipak*<sup>6</sup>. Though there had been persistent contact with both Western and Eastern people with the Meiteis through trade and migration it would be really a courageous step to claim that the Meiteis are the descendants of the Aryans.

The second theory is based on the legends of the Meiteis, which are supported by a considerable historical evidence. It is believed that the first human settlement in Manipur took shape on the Koubru Peak when the entire valley was a vast lake<sup>7</sup>. The legend says that a powerful god drained the water by cutting a big tunnel in the Indo-Burma border. This can be

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<sup>3</sup> Singh, R. K. Jhalajit – A Short History of Manipur (2<sup>nd</sup> edition), 1992, Published by the author. P-4.

<sup>4</sup> Kabui, G. op. cit. p-4

<sup>5</sup> Saha, Ranajit Kumar – Valley Society of Manipur. 1994, Punthi – Pustak, Calcutta. P-58

<sup>6</sup> Kabui, G. op. cit. p-5

<sup>7</sup> Singh, N. Tombi – Manipur and the mainstream. 1975, Cheitrebirentombichand Khorjeirul, Imphal. P-48

validated with the present tunnel called *Chingnunghoot* (a hole inside the mountain). When water drifted away, the present valley showed up and a red carpet was laid for human settlement and human civilization. Taking this as a premise Dr. R. Brown made an interesting speculation to claim that the Meiteis are the descendants of the tribal people inhabiting in hills of Manipur<sup>8</sup>. According to him, some members of hill people came down on the valley and started cultivation and after harvest went up the hills again. Then due to growth of more cultivable land, people started to settle down permanently and started a settled life.

The third group of scholars tries to substantiate the origin of the Meiteis from the ethnonym 'Meitei' itself. B. H. Hodgson opens that 'Moitay' is the combined appellation of the Siamese 'Tai' and the Kochin Chinese 'Moi'. He maintains that Meitei belongs to the 'Moi' section of the great tribe called Tai<sup>9</sup>. This theory is criticized by T. C. Hodson on the point of view of language, culture and tradition of the Meiteis. According to him there was great political and cultural influence from the Shan but to group the Meiteis with the Tai race is difficult on linguistic ground. Meitei language is more inclined towards Tibeto-Burman group of languages. Again all the archeological and historical evidences show that there was, obviously, relationship among the Meiteis and Non-Khmer and Tai people but the former is not the descendant of the latter. Another scholar Ch. Budhi Singh<sup>10</sup> takes a great leap to claim that the Meitei is the ethnic blending of people of 'Mei' and 'Ti' tribes of ancient China. He claims that 'Timei' is the original name, which was later on annagramatised into 'Meitei'. But this is critically assessed on the ground that there is no historical findings and even no oral tradition, which show some connections of the Meiteis with the ancient China and which can render validity to this theory. The historical and archeological evidences apart, the myth of the Meiteis tells a different story. It tells that man was modeled (teiba) after the image (mi) of the creator. Hence the name 'Meitei'.

## **FOOD HABIT**

The Meiteis, for that matter all the ethnic groups of Manipur, are rice eaters. This can be evidenced from the vast stretch of paddy fields in the Manipur valley. Wheat and other crops are not cultivated in a wide range. The rice is boiled without any spices or oil, except in case of

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<sup>8</sup> Hodgson, T. C. op. cit. p-7

<sup>9</sup> ibid. p-10

<sup>10</sup> Chongtham, Budhi – The ethnonym “:Meitei” In Naorem Sanajaoba (ed). Manipur – Past and Present. Vol. I, 1988, Mittal Publications. P-74

'Khechari'. A special variety of black rice called 'Chahao' is eaten with great relish. It is believed to have been imported into Manipur by Poiraiton, a Shan immigrant from upper Burma during first century A.D<sup>11</sup>. A Meitei Meal without fish is very incomplete in the true sense of the word. Whether it is a separate dish or as ingredient in other dishes, fish is the delicacy of the Meiteis. Though pure vegetarianism is practiced by some devout Vaisnavites, the remaining people including Brahmans consume fish in both fresh and dried and pickled (Ngari) forms. The feasts (Usop) related to religious ceremonies of death are purely vegetarian with various dishes of vegetables and pulses. Otherwise, feasts of other ceremonies are decorated with numerous dishes of fish. Again, an invitation to a meal is regarded as insulting and indifferent without a fish dish. In fact, fish is regarded as purer than other non-vegetarian food even egg. The obsesiveness of the Meiteis towards is because of the abundance of rivers and lakes in the valley like Imphal river, Iril river, Nambul river, Loktak lake, Waithou lake, Phumnom lake etc. which abound with various kinds of freshwater fishes. When it comes to vegetables the Manipuris consume wide range of them in addition to ~~those~~ which are eaten by people in other parts of the world. As they are surrounded by hills it is obvious for them to enjoy numerous varieties of vegetables mostly found in the hills. One of the most popular delicacies from forest is the bamboo shoot, which is taken in both fresh and preserved (under water for certain period of time) forms. The Meiteis are also staunch Pan (betel leaf and nut) eaters. Any rituals or religious ceremony is incomplete without them, which are served on circular plantain leaves. So, the Meiteis or any member of other ethnic groups in Manipur will make a better 'Robinson Crusoe' when lost in a deep and dense jungle. An important constituent of merry making and pas-time is the white country liquor (Yu), which is friendly with both young and old Meitei men. It is manufactured locally in most of the villages with indigenous technology. Though religion (Vaisnavism) decries the consumption of the liquor, the lust of this glittering liquid is so strong that religion crumbles down before temptation. In some ceremonies of Loi community,<sup>12</sup> Yu is an integral part. Yu of Sekmai, a Loi village on the national highway 39, connecting Imphal with Kohima, is the most famous Yu for its instant kick.

### COSTUMES

Manipuri traditional dresses can be grouped into formal and informal (casual). The former are the ones, which are worn during ceremonies both religious and secular.

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<sup>11</sup> Singh, R. K. Jhalajit. Op. cit. p-15

<sup>12</sup> The Lois are the degraded Meiteis. They will be dealt later in this Chapter.

The latter are the ones, which are worn when they are at home or in the fields etc. The dresses of the Meitei men are not numerous. As casual dress they wear *Khudei* (dhoti of lesser length), a sheet of lesser width and length with various designs ranging from plain colours to checks with various colours. It is worn like dhoti but with easier techniques. They wrap it round their waist, one end is tucked at centre near the belly and the other end is taken back between the legs and tucked backside. This may be accompanied by a vest or a shirt. But the Meitei men are also culturally comfortable to keep their upper body bare. As formal dresses, the Meiteis wear *pheijom* (dhoti), with a Koorta or a shirt and a shawl (during winter). The Pheijom are mostly spotless white with a golden or bluish stripe or border. They wear them as uniforms in all the ceremonies - marriage ceremony, birth ceremony or death ceremonies. There are other types of Pheijoms which were in vogue in olden days of monarchy.<sup>13</sup> The *Khamen Chatpa Pheijom* is a white silk dhoti with purple patterns of scrolls stamped on it by means of wooden blocks. During monarchic days it was not worn by persons of inferior rank but Rajkumars used it at their pleasure. In present Manipur it is confined only to the ritual performances and ceremonies. It is worn only by the performers of Sankirtan (a form of religious song and dance performance), dance (mainly Khamba-Thoibi<sup>14</sup> dance) and position holders of a village during Laiharaoba festivals (a festival to rejoice gods and goddesses). Another type of Pheijom called *Phige napu Pheijom* is an orange-coloured dhoti which was worn by Rajkumars but children were also permitted to wear it. The *Jugi-mairi* dhoti is a red silk one, which might be worn in the presence of the Raja by persons who held titles of office as members of the *Chairap* (court) or by the favour of the Raja. On ordinary occasions it might be worn by anybody but not in the presence of the Raja. The above class of people also wore another type called *gulap-machu-dhoti* (rose coloured dhoti). This latter was also worn by the children for pleasure. Apart from dhotis, Koiyets (turban) are also still worn in religious and ritual ceremonies. At present a trend is swiftly sweeping across the sartorial field. The younger generation fast replacing dhoti with Pyjama worn with Kurta, because it is comfortable to wear. This is seen to be distressing for the ones who think the white dhoti is more part of the dignity of Manipuri tradition.

The costumes of the Meitei woman include a *Phanek* (lower garment like sarong), a blouse and an *inaphee* (chadar or sheet of cloth). The Phanek is of cotton or silk and is wrapped round a woman's body. It is of three types.<sup>15</sup> The first one is called *Phanek Mayeknaibi* and is of striped nature of different colours i.e; red with green stripes, green and black-blue with black and

<sup>13</sup> Hodson, T. C. op. cit. p-15

<sup>14</sup> Khamba and Thoibi are the legendary lovers of Moirang, a town in the present Bishnupur District of Manipur.

<sup>15</sup> Devi, Ksh. Bimola – Manipuri Women – A Study. In Naorem Sanajaoba (ed) op. cit. p-163

white stripes respectively and yellow and brown-dark blue with green and white stripes respectively etc. At the top and bottom of this Phanek are broad margins on which geometrical figures or patterns of various kinds are sewn by machine or by hand with floss silk in various colours. This is a formal dress usually worn on occasional functions like marriage, feasts, festivals and other important social functions. The second type of Phanek is called Pungou Phanek and is of plain colour without any design. It is only of reddish colour. It has a sombre connection as it is worn during mourning i.e.; in death ceremonies. The last type of Phanek is a casual one and is of a simple variety made of cotton. There are numerous colours, mostly plain ones. Woman wears them in day-to-day work i.e.; at home, going to the Bazaar, to attend functions at the locality and other events of minor importance.

The phanek is open except at the bottom where it is stitched together by the edges for a few inches. Traditionally the style of wearing it is different for married and unmarried women. Married women wrap it under the armpits and over the breast and is tucked by hand at the left side of the body. This covers the body from calf to the breasts. Older women may keep upper part, above the fold of the phanek, bare. Unmarried girls wear it around the waists. But in present Manipur, both married and unmarried women started wearing it around the waists uniformly. The sheet of cloth worn along with phanek is called Inaphee and is thinner which is translucent. As a recent development, the sheet is also wrapped halfway over the Phanek mapanaibi (1<sup>st</sup> type of phanek) like a saree. The designs and quality of inaphee are quite changeable as the fashion changes.

### **A MEITEI HOUSE**

A traditional Meitei house is built of Poles and beams of wood, bamboo, thatch, reeds, mud and cow dung. The houses of the rich have poles and beams of wood and tin sheets for the roof. The ones of the poor are of the smaller size with bamboos as poles and thatch for the roof. The traditional house 'Yumjao' (big house) is two sloped from a backbone at the top. The walls are made either solely by mud beaten constantly by feet and piled up vertically or by stripes of bamboo splits or reeds on which mud mixed with cut straws and cow dung is applied. All the Meitei houses face the East direction. The Yumjao is divided into many compartments-*Manggon*, *Ningolka*, *Mayaika* and *Chakkum*. *Manggon* is the Varandah in the front side. *Ningolka* is the room of unmarried girls. *Mayaika* is the middle room, which is used by other member and married couples. This can be divided further into small compartments. The rear part is called *Chakkum*,

which is kitchen cum dining room. The right side of the verandah is permanently reserved for the eldest male members of the house. A mat is always spread over this part, which cannot be used by any other people except the seniormost male member. All the Meitei houses have four alcoves, namely, *funga*, *fungalairu*, *sanamahi kachin* and a place for the goddess Leimaren.<sup>16</sup> *Funga* is a sacred fire place in the centre of the most important part of the house. Family members gather around this during winter to enjoy the fire and enjoy stories told by elders of the family. From this tradition *Funga Wari* (folk tale) originated. Just to the West and nearby *funga* there is *fungalairu*, a small mound where the god is believed to reside. Before every meal, morning and night, a small share is offered to him. The place for the goddess Leimaren is allotted near the wall just to the North of the *Funga*. The South West corner of the house is the abode of the god *Sanamahi*. *Sanamahi* and *Leimaren* are worshipped by lighting incense sticks twice a day, one in the early morning and another at the dusk.

Every house has an open space in front called 'Shumang'<sup>17</sup> (courtyard). In the middle of every hindu house there is a *tulsi* (sacred basil) plant, which symbolizes *Brindadevi*. The extreme right corner of a shumang is called '*Khanglenpham*'. When there is a death of an inmate of the house, a hut made of bamboo called *Khanglensang* is constructed at this portion. The death body is instantly shifted to this hut before it is taken for cremation. It is believed to be a bad omen to cross this spot when one is out for a good work. A Meitei house (traditional one) is incomplete without a '*Sanggoi*', a building in the Eastern side of Shumang. It is a building without any compartment, surrounded by three walls. It is meant for day-to-day works and other ceremonies. Those who have cattle have a cowshed also in the premise. The other areas of the *Inghol* (premise of the house) serve as kitchen garden, which supply seasonal vegetables, which substantially cut down the expenses of the family on vegetables. Most of the *Inghols* have their own *Pukhris* (pond), which supply water and fish.

### **SOCIAL STRUCTURE OF THE VALLEY PEOPLE**

The valley of Manipur is originally inhabited by six distinct ethnic groups namely the Meitei, the Loi/Chakpa, the Yaithibi, the Brahman (Bamon), the Brishnupriya and the Pangan (Muslim). The first three claim to be and are regarded by other as indigenous while the last three

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<sup>16</sup> Saha, Ranjit Kumar. Op. cit. p-38

<sup>17</sup> From 'Shumang', the term Shumang lila (the form of community theatre) originated. This will be dealt in detail in Chapter-4

are immigrants from the plains of Assam and undivided Bengal.<sup>18</sup> The Manipur valley presents a pattern of inter-group stratification while intra group stratification is not prominent. The villages are inhabited by different lineage members belonging to a single ethnic group. In their day-to-day interaction in an uniethnic village, the villagers are guided by egalitarian principles. But the villagers are also aware of the other ethnic groups living in different ecological zones of the valley and refer them in terms of a notion of hierarchic relationship. The ranking position of these different groups in the total hierarchic system of the valley is fixed by genealogically or otherwise determined socio-political relationship with the king. To this endogenous principle of stratification is added the exogenous Vaisnavite concept of purity and pollution.

### TYPES OF VILLAGES AND THE SETTLEMENT PATTERN

The villages in the valley whether they belong to the Meitei or the Loi/Chakpa or the Yaithibi or the Pangan are similar in structure. The architectural design of houses is also similar in all the villages. But the villages are classified into three types depending on the ethnic identification, exploitation of natural resources (mainly land) and the designation of the headman of traditional village organization.<sup>19</sup> The first type of villages occupies the most fertile land of the valley called *fourel lou* which is mostly in the Northern or upper part of the valley. They are inhabited by the aristocrats and common Meiteis and the latter indulge in agriculture as the land is quite fertile. The headman of their traditional village organization is called *Gopal Hanjaba*.

The second type of villages is situated in marshy low land which can be classified as *taothabi lou* or *Pat lou* nearby lakes. The land is less fertile and flood prone. They are occupied mostly by the degraded Meiteis (Loi) and the Bishnupriyas. Apart from agriculture they involve in other occupations such as basket making, fishing net making etc. The designation of the headman of their traditional village organization is *Hanjaba* prefixed by the original residence name but the headman of the Bishnupriya village is called *Barpatra* prefixed by the original residence name. The third type of village is located mostly at the periphery of the valley where the foothills meet the plain and the type of agricultural lands they have is called *Angangfou lou* or *Ching lou* which are less fertile. They are inhabited by the Loi/Chakpa and the Yaithibi. The designation of the headman is *Khulakpa*. The Pangans do not come under the above three categories and their villages are dispersed at different parts of the valley.

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<sup>18</sup> Saha, Ranjit Kumar. Op. cit. p-3

<sup>19</sup> *ibid.* p-48



## THE LOI/CHAKPA

The Loi/Chakpa is an ethnic group which is very close to the Meiteis in terms of its origin. They are present day scheduled castes in Manipur who are of lower status in the inter-group hierarchy of the valley. Their low status is due to the impure occupations they indulge with, such as manufacturing of liquor, poultry farming, sericulture, swine rearing, pottery and so on.

There are different opinions about the origin of Loi/Chakpa. The first opinion says that they were once an independent tribe, which ruled some parts of the valley. According to Brown<sup>20</sup>, "The Loi is not recognized as a pure Manipuris, they appear to be descendants of the former inhabitants of Moirang, (one of the Principalities of Manipur to the south). They were formerly independent but were reduced ages ago by the Meiteis, hence the name Loi or 'subdued' which was given to them after their subjection."

Another opinion which comes from the Meitei is that the Loies are the original Meiteis who still preserve the indigenous traditions and customs of the Meiteis. On the other hand, the Meiteis have become quite hinduised and maintain a higher status than the Loies. So, some of the lowly occupations as mentioned above were handed over to the Loies. This way they developed a different identity based on specific occupations and were made to pay tributes to the king like any hill tribes. During olden days, the Meiteis who committed crimes were sent to these villages into exile as punishment. This is a temporary social degradation of the person who might be pardoned after certain period of time. But if it was not pardoned then the punishment also was applied to his whole family who then became to Loies permanently. These villages also served as safe havens for the deposition of captives, whether they were foreigners or natives like the Nagas or the Meiteis who waged wars against the king. So the Loies are the degraded cousins of the Meiteis. Hodson writes<sup>21</sup>, "In spite of or perhaps because of, this not very auspicious origin, the Loi villages are among the most prosperous villages in the state, for the reason, that untrammelled by caste prejudices, they are able and allowed to practice industries which are denied to the Meiteis, whom, however, to the neglect of their temporal advantages, they are anxious to follow into the respectability of Hinduism."

Ethnographically the Loies can be tabled vis-à-vis the Meiteis. The former are in the process of improving their social conditions to be at par with the Meiteis. The Meiteis are a reference group for them in terms of cleanliness, language, social behavior etc. Like the Meiteis,

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<sup>20</sup> *ibid.* p-62

<sup>21</sup> Hodson, T. C. *op. cit.* p-10

they have *sagei* (Lineage) names before their actual name and *Singh* at the end. Though many of them have embraced Hinduism, they still lack the respect from the Meitei Vaisnavites. The latter consider the former impure as they eat meat and drink liquor though the Meiteis consume both meat and liquor with equal enthusiasm in present day Manipur. The social distance present today is the historical remnant of the past, which will take some time to dispose of. In some areas the Lois are not allowed to attend the Meitei communal feasts and if allowed they are fed separately. Their traditional religion is more like Meiteis indigenous religion. Though they have their ritual specialists, anyone can pray directly to the gods and goddesses. In terms of cleanliness of the house, surrounding and village, they lag behind the Meiteis though they try hard to emulate the latter. In comparison to the Meiteis, the Lois lack the standard of mannerism to the elders. They rarely use respectful terms to address the elders though the scenario is changing fast among them to come up at par with the Meiteis. Their Manipuri language is highly accented and is called '*Lol khoiba*' (curled language). Sometimes it is difficult for a Meitei to understand what they talk to each other. But when they converse with the Meiteis they try hard to modify their accent and speak like any Meiteis.

There are many similarities in the worship of deities and celebration of festivals between the Loi/Chakpa and the Meitei. Like the Meities, the Loi/chakpa also worship *Fungalairu*, *Sanamahi* and *Leimaren*. Their life cycle rituals are also quite similar to those of the Meiteis though they perform them without Sankirtana of Vaisnavites. Instead, they perform with the accompaniment of folk songs and *Pena* (a traditional string instrument). In most of these rituals, country liquor (*Yu*) and meat (mainly pork) are served. Because of this, a devout Meitei Vaisnavite would not like to attend the ritual ceremonies of the Lois. It is a cultural shock for the Meiteis to be served pork or chicken in a Shradha (death ceremony) ceremony. For this reason, the Lois are considered impure though they think that such cultural habits are the true ones which the Meiteis followed before Vaisnavism came some centuries back. Annual festivals of both the Meiteis and the Lois are almost the same. Like the Meiteis, the Loi/Chakpa also celebrate *Cheiraoba* (worship of the god Sanamahi on the new year day) in the month of Sajibu {April }; *Khunthonglatpa* (worshipping evil spirits to appease them at main entrance of the village) in the months of Lamta(March/April) and Kalen.(April/May); *Foukouba* (worshipping god Punthiba for bumper crop) in the month of Hiyangei (October/November) and *Laiharaoba festival* (worship of village god Umanglai). Apart from this the Lois also celebrate some extra annual ceremonies, which the Meiteis do not celebrate. They include *Shatanba* (hunting) ceremony in the month of Fairen (February/March). This has become symbolic in present day, which is a residue of the past ceremony, which used to be real. Another typical ceremony is called *Khoi-Katpa* (offering of

larvae of bees), the gathering ceremony in which the larvae of the bees and honey are collected and are offered to the Umanglai god, in the month of Mera (September/October). The Loi/Chakpa also celebrates a different variant of Laiharaoba, which cannot be witnessed by any outsider. Despite all these differences the Lois/Chakpa are trying hard to uplift their social status vis-à-vis that of the Meiteis and are trying hard to be recognized as the Meitei. In totality, in present day Manipur, Loi/Chakpa are also considered as part of the Meitei fold even by the common Meiteis because of their social, cultural and religious proximity to the Meiteis. There are increasing instances of intermarriage between them and the Meiteis, though it will take some more years to wipe out the stigma stamped on the Loi/Chakpa.

### **THE YAITHIBIS**

Literally Yaithibi means bad luck (Yai=luck, thibi=bad) because they had been reduced to low status. Yaithibis are also under Meitei fold but are outcastes. The Meitei version of the ex-communication of the Yaithibi is that they were exiled because of their indulgence in socially tabooed traditions like marrying near relatives like sisters, stepmothers and other near kins. But this outsider version is seriously rejected by the Yaithibis. Though they agree to the fact that they are outcastes, they give a different version for their ex-communication. Once upon a time, a few favoured people of a king had illicit relationship with the queen and infuriated, the king sent those people and their kith and kin on exile and reduced them as outcaste. Another version says that there was a tension between the king Garibaniwaj (1709-1748) and his son prince Ajit Shai over a girl called Laishram Ningol Thambal Nganbi whom both father and son desired. In order to punish the girl for accessible to both, she, along with her relatives, were sent an exile after Garibaniwaj died. These people were also pardoned criminals who were exiled in border not to have any social communication with the Meiteis. The story says that all the criminals who were to be executed were sent to the Shugnu Village. But such executions could be prevented if the wife of Shugnu Hanjaba, the headman of Shugnu village, wanted. So, those who were pardoned by her were sent to those Yaithibi village so as not to have any social connection with their parent society. In this process they became untouchables and grouped in one village, Waithou, situated near their present village, Thoubal Khunou. It is believed that they served as scavengers in king's palace. Otherwise, they were not allowed to move freely in the Meitei Villages and even their shadows were considered impure. Whenever they ventured out of their village they wore blue coloured clothes and turbans so that other Meiteis could avoid them.

Today there has been substantial improvement in the social condition of the Yaithibi and past is being left buried. Culturally and socially they are almost like the Meitei. Like the Meitei they used Sagei (Lineage name) name as forename and Singh as the last name (for the Vaisnavites). Some of them have already embraced Vaisnavism while others opted for the indigenous Meitei religion or Christianity. Their life cycle ceremonies and other annual festivals are like that of the Meitei's. They also worship gods and goddesses of household like the Meitei. The life cycle rituals of the Yaithibi vaisnavites are carried out by the degraded Brahmins (low status Brahmins in the hierarchy of Meitei Brahmins). Though they are Vaisnavites, they are not considered as at par with the Meiteis by the latter. The Meiteis think that they are unclean, their language is crude and they lack respect for the elders. In order to get rid of all these defamations from the majority ethnic group and also to assimilate to the latter, the Yaithibis even changed their village from their original village. In spite of these endeavours, they still are stuck to their social signature.

#### **THE BAMONS (BRAHMINS)**

The Bamons are an integral part of the religious life of Vaisnavite Meiteis. No life cycle ritual is performed without the Pooja, the chanting of 'Shlokas' by the Bamons. Originally, they were immigrants from different parts of the present India, who came as priests and scholars of Hinduism. From the reign of Kyamba (1467-1508)<sup>22</sup> onwards small small batches of Bamons started immigrating to Manipur. The records of their immigration were kept preserved in a treatise called *Bamon Khunthok* meaning the immigration of Brahmins (Bamon=Brahmin; khunthok=immigration).

Some of these Brahmins brought their wives along with them when they immigrated but others married Meitei women and settled down in the valley. In order to survive in this foreign land they accepted Manipuri customs, manners, food habits and even the pattern of naming. They have acculturated the Meitei way of life, for centuries in such a way that they cannot be pointed out as outsiders from the external characteristics. They are now Meiteis in all possible ways, so that they are called Meitei Bamons. It would be derogatory to call them outsiders today when they have been completely assimilated to the Meitei fold.

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<sup>22</sup> Singh. R. K. Jhalajit. Op. cit. p-93

The Bamons speak, eat (even fish & meat) and dress like any Meitei. They had even adopted the Meitei lineage system though they are not part of 7 clan system of the Meitei. Like Meiteis they prefix their names with sagei names, for instance Adhikarimayum, Gurumayum etc. The only difference is the use of 'Sharma' at the end of every male member instead of 'Singh' in case of Meitei's. The female members use 'Devi' like any other Vaisnavite female Meitei, at the end of their names, for instance, Gurumayum Kananbala Devi. To them, Gotra system is more important. So, even in conducting a Meitei marriage they use the gotra of the marrying person, which is juxtaposed with the Meitei clan.

Priesthood and cooking for community feasts are the main traditional occupations of the Meitei Bamons. All the community feasts of the Gauriya (Vaisnavite) Meiteis must be cooked by them. Otherwise they are regarded as impure and any devout Vaisnavite will not attend such feasts. The Meiteis who follow the indigenous Meitei Dharma have their own cooks and do not regard Bamons as necessary. In regards to other occupation, they are also involved in agriculture. But they never plough, as it is a degrading act for them. If at all they also plough due to economic circumstances, their status is reduced and is mocked at by other Meiteis.

The Bamons are the only priests of Hindu temples. Every Bamon has a temple, enshrining deities like Gauranga Mahaprabhu, Shri Krishna, Radha, Jaganath and other less known ones. They are worshipped by them twice a day, one in the Morning and another in the evening, by offering food to them. In front of the temple there is a Mandap (pavilion) meant for community activities like Rasa Lila performances, marriage ceremony, feasts, Lairik taba (recital from the scriptures which is enjoyed by the people)etc.

The daily activities, life cycle rituals and annual festivals of the Bamons are like those of Gauriya Meiteis. They also worship the household deities of the Meiteis with full devotion and reverence like any other Meitei. This might have been an attempt by their forefathers to be accepted by the native people who, despite being dominant, accepted the ritual superiority of the former.

### **THE BISHNUPRIYA**

There are two contradictory versions of the origin of the Bishnupriyas. The first one is by the Bishnupriyas themselves. According to this, they are the indigenous people of the valley, the autochthon Kshatriyas who are the descendants of Babhrubahan of Mahabharata. They claim to be

the original worshippers of the Vishnu god. But when the Meitei king became powerful, they were driven out of the Manipur but came back and settled down when Vaisnavism came to the valley. This way, they proclaim that they are of superior culture. But the Meiteis regard them as outsiders and late settlers of the Valley who are of different gotras. Even their god Vishnu is not an original Meitei god. Bishnupriyas have distinctive facial appearance, which is quite similar to that of North Indians. For this, the Meiteis even group them within the category of '*Mayang*', all the westerners whose looks are Aryan and not mongoloid. The Meitei have history to back their claim over the Bishnupriyas. The immigration from Assam and Bengal took place during the time when the Vishnu temple was installed at Bishnupur some five hundred years ago. It is believed that the king Kyamba (1467-1508)<sup>23</sup> was searching frantically for the persons who could prepare Kshir (rice cooked in milk with sugar and other tasty ingredients) for the newly installed Vishnu image which he received as a gift from the king of Siam. So, the people who came from the west to cook Kshir settled down in valley and their members also increased. They were non-significant till Rajarsi Bhagyachandra (1759-1762) married a maiden from this community, leading to the birth of a son named Kalaraj. The Rajkumar families in Ningthoukhong in present day Bishnupur district trace their origin to him. Most of the Bishnupriyas fled to Cachar district of Assam, Tripura and Sylhet (in present day Bangladesh) during Manipur-Burmese wars. But Kalaraj and his relatives remained in Manipur and as time passed by they slowly accultured themselves into the Meitei fold. The present day Bishnupriyas in Manipur have almost forgotten their original language and they speak Manipuri language only. Unlike them, the ones in Assam, Tripura and Bangladesh have different dialect, which is more like deformed Bengali than Manipuri though it has quite a large number of Manipuri vocabularies.

The Meitei considers the Bishnupriya as of inferior culture. The latter accepted Gauriya Vaisnavism later than the Meitei. But today the Bishnupriyas are indistinguishable culturally and socially from the vaisnavite Meiteis. Like Gauriya Meiteis, They pierce their ears (both male and female), wear sacred threads and beads, put sacred marks (Chandan) on their foreheads and employ Brahmans for their ritualistic and religious ceremonies. They also celebrate all the life cycle rituals and also annual festivals like the Meiteis. The lineage system is also like that of the Meiteis and they have Singh and Devi as titles (aftername) and Sagei (lineage) name as forename. Their mannerism towards elders and pronunciation of words are also almost as polished as that of the Meiteis though there are some curlings in some of the words they speak. Their assimilation to

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<sup>23</sup> Singh, N. Tombi. Op. cit. p-79

the Meitei society is complete though the majority Meitei still has certain prejudices and stigma attached to them because of their origin and looks.

### THE PANGANS

The Pangans are the Muslims who migrated from the districts of Sylhet and Cachar. Originally they were known as 'Bengal' as they are mostly Bengalis and it became Pangan. Historically the Meiteis came into contact with the Muslims during the reign of Khagemba (1597-1652) who captured large number of them in a battle against

his own brother Sanongba. The latter who fled to Cachar (Assam) organized a large army including Muslims and invaded his elder brother's kingdom to settle the account. But he was defeated and captured prisoners including the Muslims were allowed to settle down.

The Pangans are expert agriculturists and are involved in the profession of turning, carpentry and pottery. They also served as sepoy in olden days and almost all the drummers and buglers of the Raja's army were Pangans. They were as patriotic as any Meitei during the battles, which the Manipuri Rajas fought with neighboring kingdoms. As mentioned elsewhere, a musalman leader was appointed as Kazi to govern a Pangan village as a reward for his manual service to the Raja. Some of the contributions of the Pangans to the Meitei society are paddy transplantation, carrying of Dolai (a sort of Palanquin), Hidak-Thakpa (hooka smoking) etc.

These Muslims have been given the status of being within the social space of the Meitei and are addressed as the Meitei Pangan. They speak Manipuri language though they carry out their religious rituals in Arabic. As compared to the Meitei they are more conservative in their religious prescriptions and thus lack modern education as their Arabic education is imparted in their villages so as to be able to read Koran. The Maulavi is responsible for their marriage and circumcision. In terms of food habits, they are equally comfortable with whatever other Meiteis eat, they enjoy beef which the Meitei mostly refrain from and avoid pork. Their preparation of dishes is comparatively cleaner with most of the spices crushed into soft powders. Their dining style is a bit different from that of the Meitei as they put the plates on a mat. Their dressing style is also distinct. Traditionally male Pangans wear Salwar-Kameej while female wears a long shirt over a Phanek (lower garment) whose colour is distinct from that of Meitei women's. Socially, they are a distinct ethnic group though they have embraced Meitei lineage (Sagei) system upto a

certain extent. They also practise lineage exogamy. Like the Meitei they also practise the elopement form of marriage.<sup>24</sup>

Despite centuries of settled life side by side with the Meiteis, the Pangans have not been assimilated completely into the Meitei social structure though they have been influenced by the latter in many ways. They still maintain a separate identity with no or a few intermarriages between them and the Meitei. They still look like any Bengali due to above reason. Due to their economic backwardness, they are engaged in lowly jobs like rickshaw pulling in Imphal city, but they are hard working and enterprising people. The Meiteis have certain reservations about the Pangans. They think that the latter are stingy. There are innumerable jokes and stories of miserliness which are commonly told about the Pangans by the Meiteis.

From the above study of the other ethnic groups of the valley it is substantiated that the Meiteis are held up as reference group and all of them, except the Pangans, tried and still are trying to be part of the Meitei social structure. There is near homogeneity in the cultural elements of the ethnic groups excepting the Pangans. So, the Meitei society covers the entire Manipur valley, although socially the Meiteis are distinguished from other groups such as the Bishnupriyas, the Brahmins, Loi/chakpa and the Yaithibi.<sup>25</sup> It can be said that the Meitei society is encompassing and other ethnic groups are encompassed.

### STATUS GROUP

Ranjit Kumar Saha, in his ethnographic study of the valley society gives three status groups among the people of the valley though in general outlook they are indistinguishable from one another. They are (1) *Achou-Asang macha* (aristocrats), (2) *Meecham* (commoner) and (3) *hanthaba mee* (degraded people). They are the ones, which were created historically based on two criteria<sup>26</sup>--

- (i) their position in the overall segmentary structure
- (ii) their participation in the political organization of the state system.

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<sup>24</sup> Saha, R. K. op. cit. p-79

<sup>25</sup> *ibid.* p-79

<sup>26</sup> *ibid.* p-85



In their self identification the common people classify themselves into Meitei and Loi. The Meiteis are again grouped into aristocrat and commoner groups. The Lois are degraded people.

### **(1) Achou-Asang Macha**

This status group is constituted by the people of the aristocratic lineages of the Meitei only. They include the lineage of the king, the lineages of the husbands of the Rajkumaris called Sijamouwa (Sija-Rajkumaris; mouwa-husband) and the king's favourite people. Within this group also, there is a hierarchy. The royal lineage with its power and respect from the remaining people of the kingdom is at the top. After this, the lineage of the in-laws of the Royal lineage comes and the lowest rung of this highest status group is occupied by the people favoured by the king. Due to the abolition of the kingship and advent of the modern democratic establishments, this privilege enjoyed by the aristocratic people is made non-functional though Manipur still have the descendants of those royal people called Rajkumars. In present day Manipur people holding high government posts and their relatives are considered, upto certain extent, as Achou-Asang Macha.

### **(2) Meecham**

Meecham literally means commoner. They are of the common Meitei lineages and also of pure Brahman lineages. They are the people who do not have any connubial relationship with the Royal lineages. Within this group also there are originally different ethnic groups-*Meitei Ariba*, *Nongchup Haram* (people from the west) and *Nongpok haram* (people from the east). The first one is the only indigenous people. Nongchup haram includes foreigners from the west like Bishnupriyas and Brahmins and Nongpok haram are the ones who came from the East (Burma etc.). These two are now indistinguishable from the Meitei socially and culturally and are part of the common Meiteis. Further the common Meiteis can be broadly divided into occupational and non-occupational groups. The occupational lineages have one occupation attached to each of them. They are again bifurcated into Artisans and Non-Artisans. The artisan lineages include *Thangjam* (blacksmith), *Aheibam* (brass metal worker) and *Sanjam* (goldsmith). The non-artisan lineage includes the *Lairikyengbam* who were formally clerks in the king's court. The non-occupational groups are those who are settled in the Northern fertile land and who were not

isolated and subjugated by the kings. During native rule there was differential distinction among them. The non-occupational lineages were at the top followed by the Lairikyengbam and the artisan lineages respectively. But this distinction is no more present among common Meiteis today.

The pure Bamons can constitute a separate topic of study. They are the ones who follow ritual activities scrupulously. During the native rule days there was status difference within them also. The pure Bamons who serve Govindajee temple in Imphal stood at the top followed by the ones who were preceptors of the Royal family and the ones who served other common Meiteis. But such distinction is bleak today. As they have common Meitei lineages they are included in this status group of Meecham. But Non-Vaisnava Meiteis are against adjusting the Bamons in their rank as they think that the latter are foreigners and so are inferior to them.

### **(3) Hanthaba-Mee**

Literally it means degraded people. Like the Meecham they are also composed by Meitei Ariba, Nongchup haram and Nongpok haram who, of course, are degraded ones unlike the Meecham. Traditionally they included the impure Brahmins, the Loi/chakpa, the Yaithibi and other people who were disfavoured by the king. They were degraded because they were either forced to accept some occupations or were not allowed to settle down in the fertile Northern plains, by the king. Generally all of them are addressed as Loi but the others are different from Loi/chakpa as they are conferred derogatory occupations. Other Loies also include those inhabited in Moirang, Thanga, Ithing, Wangoo, Chairel etc. which are in the low and marshy part of the plain far off from the Northern fertile land.

The impure Bamons are those Bamons who do not perform their duties perfectly nor do they adhere to the prescribed ritual and social norms. They are again divided into Makhutchadaba and Ganaks or Konoks. The former are the ones who do not obey food interdiction. They are not employed as cooks by the common Meitei though they may officiate in ceremonies as they adhere to their sacred commitments upto certain extent. But they are not employed as priests by high status Gauriya Meiteis. The Ganaks do not adhere to both food interdiction and ritual commitments. So, they are not allowed to be either cook or priest though they are astrologers. They occupy the lowest rung even below Bamon makhutchadaba of the Bamon hierarchy. So, they are fit to club within the hanthaba mee. These status differences are dying down in present

day Manipur due to shifting of occupations from the previous ones to modern ones and also due to modern education.

Apart from the above three status groups, there are also two groups based on territorial distribution of the people of the valley. They are-(1) *Imphal* and (2) *Lawai*. People who live in Imphal city consider themselves as more civilized and developed than people in other parts of the state. Due to living in the capital of Manipur for ages and early exposure to modern education, they are advanced in knowledge, standard of living and dressing sense. They are more enterprising and act smarter than any other people from other parts of Manipur. At the diametrically opposite pole there is a majority group called Lawai. They are mostly from rural areas of Manipur, mostly people in Meitei fold. They are mostly agriculturist, so the name Lawai (Lou=field). As they are away from the city life, their life style is rustic, their dressing sense is quite traditional and their outlook little more conservative as compared to Imphal dwellers. But they are the torch bearers of native customs and folklores. They are educationally backward and are less enterprising than Imphal dwellers as they are a bit afraid and hesitant to move out of the traditional occupations of farming and fishing. The title Lawai is a label which creates an inferiority complex amongst people outside Imphal city.

The above dichotomy is more than the age old dichotomy of Urban and rural. Even the Urban people of other towns of Manipur are grouped under the heading of Lawai. It is rather a dichotomy between Imphal dwellers and the rest. But due to the increasing educational, cultural and occupational conditions of the people outside Imphal, the attitude of the Imphal dwellers is gradually changing day-by-day. Today, the term Lawai is gaining the status of an adjective which is widely used for the indecent and uncivilized people both in Imphal and the rest of the state. It is becoming a derogatory term. Even the people of the other part of the state are using this word to abuse those who are uncivil. This change in the scenario is, in a way, due to the endeavour of the Lawai people to improve their living standard and mannerism by imitating Imphal people. In this process, they even migrate to Imphal city and try to claim the Imphal status. But for a certain period they still suffer from this label called Lawai and their neighbours treat them accordingly. The symbols of modernity which have a homogenizing impulse have contributed to the Lawai speaking and dressing in much the same way as the Imphal.

## KINSHIP SYSTEM OF THE MEITEI VIS-À-VIS THAT OF OTHER ETHNIC GROUPS

The Meitei Society and other societies which have been amalgamated into Meitei fold are Patrilineal in descent and inheritance, Patrilocal in residence (though there is also a custom called *Yaong-inba* when the Son-in-law lives with his in-laws specially when the latter do not have any male progeny), and Patriarchal in authority where all the important decisions are taken by the seniormost male member of the household or the lineage. The Meitei society is a segmentary system having units of differing genealogical distance. The largest unit or segment is called *Salai* (clan), the second one is *yumnak* {Maximal lineage}, the 3<sup>rd</sup> one - *Sagei* (Major lineage), the 4<sup>th</sup> *Chagok* (persons in 3 living generations}, the 5<sup>th</sup> is *Immung* (family) which is the core social unit, then the last one is man. Ideally, it is believed that all the clans had the same origin from *Shidaba mapu*, the divine ancestor (Shidaba= immortal, mapu=father). This can be diagrammatically represented as follows:--

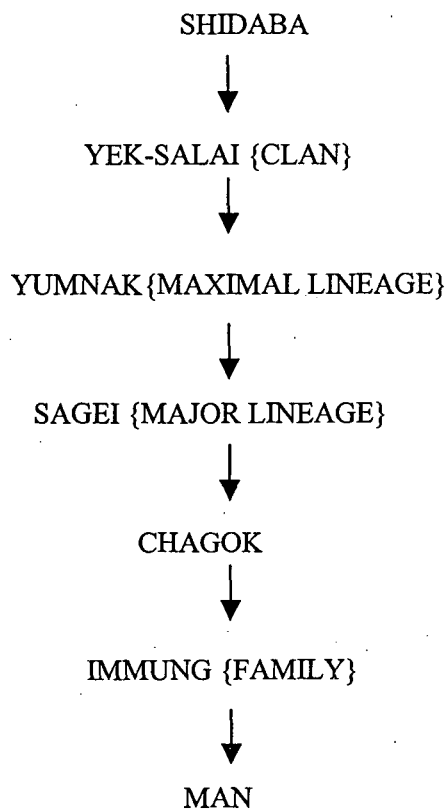


Fig.1 <sup>27</sup> Meitei Kinship System

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<sup>27</sup> ibid. p-95

This above Meitei segmentary system has a time perspective. There is structural relationship among the segments. The whole structural relationship can be represented as the one between the last living person in the line of descent and the first person in the ascending line. This is what Evans - Pritchard called 'structural distance'.<sup>28</sup> It can be shown as follows.

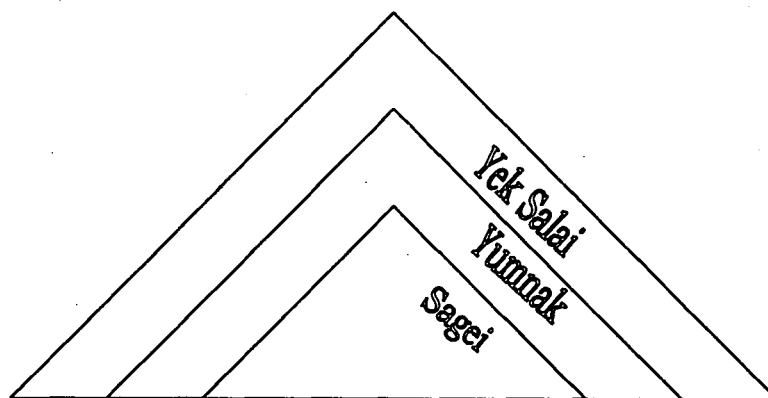


Fig. 2 Genealogical distance

In this diagram the base line is represented by the living agnates and the pyramidal lines the dead agnates. The line depth is highest in case of Yek-salai followed by Yumnak and Sagei respectively, measuring from the apex of the whole structure.

### THE SALAI SYSTEM

There are seven salais in the Meitei social structure. They are:--(a) *Ningthouja*, (b) *Angom*, (c) *Luwang*, (d) *Khuman*, (e) *Moirang*, (f) *Khaba-nganba* and (g) *Chenglei*. The Salai can be aptly called clan rather than caste. So, the Meitei Salai can be equated with Gotra of Hindu caste system. Caste system is very rudimentary within the Meitei society. So, equating the Salai with Jati is not appropriate since the former is an exogamous group while the latter is an endogamous one. In this connection let us venture to the caste ridden Indian society. Caste or Jati is an in-marrying group with a defined ascribed status. Gotra, on the other hand, is an out-marrying subdivision of Jati. Gotra denotes descent from a common ancestor in the distant past.

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.* p-113

The ancestor is usually a mythological figure or a sage. Kula (or Vansha) represents a lineage, with a five or six generation depth. Beyond this the line is blurred.<sup>29</sup>

Like Gotra, the Salais also have their originators. These original ancestors whether they were god or Ningthou (chief) are called Salai-Apokpa. So, the founder of the Ningthouja Salai was '*Nongda Lairen Pakhangba*'; the Angom '*Pureiromba*'; the Moirang '*Nganghunthok*' and '*Ngangningshing*'; The Khaba-Nganba '*Thongaren*'; the chenglei '*Nungou yumthangba*'; and that of the khuman and the Luwang was poireiton. Since the time vaisnavism came to this Meitei land, there have been efforts to bring every cultural and social aspect to Hindu fold. From naming this land as Manipur to the Royal genealogy to that of Babruvahana of Mahabharata and to the giving of Hindu Gotra names to the indigenous Salais, the Brahman priests and Hindu scholars have worked finding all permutations and combinations to Hinduise this Meitei land. As a result these indigenous Salais have got their Hindu counterparts also

Ningthouja ---- Sandilya<sup>30</sup>  
 Angom ----- Goutam  
 Moirang ----- Atriya Angiras  
 Luwang ----- Kashyap  
 Khuman ----- Madhukalya  
 Khaba-nganba --- Madhukalya and Bharadwaja  
 Chenglei ----- Basistha.

This combination is a concocted myth and looks inappropriate. Nevertheless the Brahman priests use these Gotra names during the life cycle rituals connected with Birth, initiation, marriage and death of a Vaisnava Meitei. Outside this ritual sphere, no common Meitei knows these hindu pseudonyms of the Salais. In common Parlance the clan is addressed as Yek-Salai. Every Yek-Salai has one *laigi- Yelhin*, which is a totem, associated with the originator or Apokpa. They are mostly plants. Though they do not have any practical use these days, they used to be significant in olden days.

Originally these seven Salais were seven tribes ruling different principalities in the valley. Initially the term Meitei was addressed only to the Ningthouja tribe. But due to the subjugation of other tribes by Ningthoujas, the term also applied to them too as they had been brought within the

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<sup>29</sup> Dube, S. C. – Indian Society, 1990, National Book Trust. P-48

<sup>30</sup> Saha, R. K. op. cit. p-107

Meitei fold. Historically four of the Salais-Angom, Moirang, Khaba-nganba and Chenglei were in existence before the Christian era while Khuman, Luwang and Ningthouja emerged around the beginning of the first century A.D.<sup>31</sup> Their principalities can be loosely located in different parts of Imphal valley.<sup>32</sup> the Ningthoujas occupied the western side of present Imphal and kangla was their capital. The Angom principality was to the East and north-East of the Ningthoujas and their capital was at Pureiromba. The Khumans were to the south of the Ningthoujas and their capital was at Thoubal. The Moirangs occupied the West of the Khumans and South-West of the Ningthoujas and their capital was at Moirang. The Luwang principality was lying to the North and North-West of the Ningthoujas and its capital was at Lamphel. The Chengleis were to the South-East and South-west of the Ningthoujas with their capital at Takna. As the Ningthoujas became powerful they defeated other tribes and unified the valley people in a single entity called Meitei. Even before this there was a very cordial relationship between the Ningthoujas and the Angoms. The relationship between the Ningthouja king and the Angom king was that of Son-in-law and father-in-law.

This Yek-Salai system is now applied also to the Loi/Chakpa, the Bishnupriya and the Yaithibi . Apart from them the people who came from the East in early times (Nongpok Haram) such as the Shans, the Burmese, the Chinese etc. were also given the Yek-Salai names. This shows the accommodating nature of the Meitei society. But this was not applied to those late immigrants from the West such as Brahmans etc. So, the *Brahmans*, the *Lairikyengbams* and the *Kshetrimayums* (Kshatriyas of Manipur) were given the privilege to have Meitei lineage names but not the Salai names.

### YUMNAK

Yumnak is the lineage in the Meitei segmentary system. A Yek-Salai has many Yumnaks. Atombapu Sharma, a Vaisnava pundit, gives a list of Yumnaks gathered from the *Puiya* (the sacred books of the Yumnaks).<sup>33</sup> According to him the Ningthouja Salai has 116 Yumnaks, 52 under the Angom, 100 under the Khuman, 46 under the Luwang, 55 under the Moirang, 20 under the Khaba-Nganba and 44 under the Chenglei Yek-Salais. But this list is not an exhaustive one. Many Yumnak members migrated to other places in Bangladesh, Tripura, Assam and Burma and

<sup>31</sup> Konsam Manikchand – The evolution of the Meitei State (A confederacy through the last two Millenia). In Naorem Sanajaoba (ed). Op. cit. p-149

<sup>32</sup> *ibid.* p-151

<sup>33</sup> Saha, R. K. op. cit. p-98

it is difficult to have a thorough account of all these people of different Yumnaks. Moreover, there are many Yumnaks, which are not included in the Salais. All the Yumnaks of the Bamons (around 40),<sup>34</sup> Kshetrimayum, Lairikyengbam are not included in the above list. Again the Meitei Pangans { muslims } also adopt this typical Meitei lineage system and have many yumnak.

A Yumnak under a Salai covers thirty or forty or even more generations starting from the creator. It is very difficult for one to remember all the members of his Yumnak, dead or alive. But they are recorded in its *Yumchangba Puiya* or *Paripuri* (genealogy). The addition of new members in a Yumnak is done during its *Apokpa Khurumjaba* (worship of Apokpa) when all the members are gathered at the *Pibaren's* (the seniormost living male member of the Yumnak) house at the intervals ranging between five to ten years. The names of the new members by birth or adoption or by marriage (in case of women) are added to the genealogy. The girls are excluded from the Paripuri of their fathers but are included in the Paripuri of their husbands. Today the number of members of a Yumnak has become too large to gather at one place for community feast. In earlier days, they were corporate groups with a few members. During those days all the members of a yumnak observed *Yummangba* (birth and death pollution). But today this function is done by the Sageis (sub-division of a Yumnak).

The story behind the name of every Yumnak is quite interesting. Name of a Yumnak was given following certain characteristics such as<sup>35</sup> - (1) the nature of the creation of a Yumnak, (2) occupation performed by a Yumnak member, (3) the title given by the king to the Yumnak members, (4) the service rendered to the king by the Yumnak members, (5) the service allotted to the creator by the king, (6) any peculiar behaviour or characteristics of the creator, (7) the name of the creator, (8) the residence of the creator etc. For instance *Ayekpam* (Angom salai) is so called because they are painters (Ayekpa), *Labuktongbam* (a Bamon Yumnak) was after their place of residence i.e., settlers in the rice field (loubuk=rice field) etc.

### SAGEI

Sagei is the segment of a Yumnak. It can be called major lineage following Evans Pritchard. It is a corporate group, which observes Yummangba (birth and death pollution). A Sagei of a Yumnak can be formed by the process who so far away from their Yumnak members and also it can be formed by the process of *Fukainaba* (fu=Pitcher, Kainaba=to break) between

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<sup>34</sup> Singh, R. K. Jhaljit. Op. cit.

<sup>35</sup> Saha, R. K. op. cit. p-100



two groups (*kangbu*) of a Yumnak. And it can also be formed due to factional rivalry between groups of the Yumnak. Generally Yumnak and Sagei are regarded as synonymous among the people. The Sagei is not named like Yumnak. Most of the works done by the Yumnak have been replaced by the sagei. Yumnak becomes too large to be functional. Like Yumnak, a sagei has its own Pibaren (the eldest male member) and genealogy maintained in Puiya, which is sacred. It also worships the Apokpa of the Yumnak. For this, the members of the sagei establish *Apokpa Laipham*, (the temple of Apokpa) by installing a little earth from the original Apokpa Shrine of the Yumnak. Apokpa khurumjaba (worship of Apokpa) has two modes. The first one is called 'Sareng Chanaba' that is, the offering of Sareng fish to the Apokpa. This consecrated food is eaten only by the elders of the Sagei. The other one is the *Sagei Chakchanaba* (Sagei feast) when all the members of the Sagei are gathered to take a large feast.

A Sagei is an open ended group. While Yumnak is an ascribed name, a sagei is changeable. A member of a sagei can switch his loyalty to the other sagei of the same Yumnak. He can be admitted only when the Piba and other elders of the sagei accept him. If everything is agreeable then the new member has to perform Lathaba ceremony in a sagei gathering. In this ceremony the Apokpa is worshipped and then sagei chakchaba is performed when the new member is introduced to other members by the Piba of the sagei and he is included in the genealogy of the sagei.

The corporate character of a sagei is due to the maintenance of a close relationship among its members and also due to the observance of Yummangba. When a person of the sagei dies, all the houses of the sagei are informed and they observe death pollution. They replace all the earthen pots and clean all the metal pots. In case of a child the observance of the pollution is of 7 days, for an adult it is 12 days and 14 days in case of *Lamboiba* (monk). This is the period when the members abstain from non-vegetarian food. Then a sagei observes 12 days of birth pollution.

*Chagoks* are the loosely defined sub-groups of a sagei. A chagok is made up of 3 generations only. The eldest male member of this three generation group is given the highest respect and his decision is binding. But chagoks are not clearly defined and is not in use in social life. Sometimes a chagok is defined as the group of families which cultivate the same family land and the product is divided amongst them. *Immung* (family) is the smallest social unit of the Meitei Society. There are both joint and nuclear families. Once a son is married, he is ready to form a nuclear family. If a couple has more than one son, one of them is allowed to establish his own family after marriage {*tongan-chaba*}. A son, mostly the youngest one, has to live with the

parents after his marriage so that he can take care of his parents. This amounts to a Meitei Joint family.

## MARRIAGE

The valley societies, which come under the Meitei fold follow clan exogamy and ethnic group endogamy but with amplification and violations time to time. Amplifications in the clan exogamy are that the Angoms were not allowed to marry with the Khabanganbas, the Moirangs & Luwangs.<sup>36</sup> The Luwangs were forbidden to take their wives from among the Khumans and the Moirangs were not permitted to marry the Khabanganbas and one or two families of the chenglei Salai. The Ningthouja Salai does not marry two Yumnaks of the Moirang Salai namely Mungyangjam and Loirenjam as these Yumnaks are also the descendants of Pakhangba, the originator of the Ningthouja Salai.

Further, there is a rule of general application that a man may not marry a woman of the clan from which his mother came. This prohibition goes on further than one generation. The ethnic groups mostly maintain endogamous marriages. There are many cases of intermarriages between them though they come with a price. All the ethnic groups including the Pangans (Muslims) practise *marriage by elopement* i.e., the boy takes the girl to his home as a formality before marriage. If elopement takes place between two ethnic groups of the low status, the couple is socially recognized and the marriage is held. For instance, the marriage is done between the degraded Meitei (Loi/chakpa) and Bishnupriya. If the elopement takes place between a high and a low status group, the rule of endogamy is strictly followed. In this case the member whether girl or boy, of the high status group such as the Meitei or the Brahman has to leave her or his village and live in the low status group village such as Loi/Chakpa and the Yaithibi.

The elopement between the Brahman boy and the Meitei girl is socially permitted but not vice versa. In case of the former, the marriage is held but the Meitei girl is not recognized by any social ceremony. She is not allowed to cook food for her in-laws and other members (*Makhutchadaba*). But their offsprings are legitimate Brahmins. In case of a Brahmin girl eloping with Meitei boy, the marriage ceremony is not held. The marriage between the Meitei and the Bishnupriya is being socially recognized as the latter is quite closer to the Meitei fold.

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<sup>36</sup> Hodson, T. C. op. cit. p-75

Polygyny is a socially accepted form of marriage in the valley. In olden days the Rajas used to have as many wives as they wished to. This was extended to the nobles and other commoners who wished to. This is still a vogue in modern day Manipur though it is not frequent and is frowned upon by others.

There are three types of marriage in Meitei society. They are-(1) *Luhongba*, (2) *Keina katpa* and (3) *Loukhatpa*.

*Luhongba* is the proper marriage where all the intricacies and procedures are followed properly. It is done when the two parties of the girl and boy are accepted to one another. Before this the elopement is done in most of the cases. As tradition, courting between the girl and the boy is done in all the cases except for some cases where engagement between two family is done. This is what people say 'love marriage'. It would be a very strange thing for a Manipuri to marry someone whom she/he has not seen or has not understood. So, the next morning after the elopement, a group of elders from the boy's side goes to the girl's place to inform that their girl is with them (*Paohanba*) and to negotiate whether the marriage should be held or not. If both the sides agree to this arrangement then they will go for the *Luhongba*. Otherwise, a party may reject it. If the girl's party rejects it then there are two options - one, to accommodate her to the boy's place and two, to take back the girl to her father's place (*Phadoknaba*). But the latter is very unsuccessful as the girl may elope again with the same boy.

The second form of marriage is called *Keina Katpa*. It is a nominal marriage ceremony without the intricate process of *Luhongba*. It is just a formality to make the couple legitimate husband and wife. It is done mainly in hurry when both the parties do not want it to be a big ceremony or when one party is not fully convinced of the relationship but just wants to get the headache over as soon as possible. The last form of marriage, *Loukhatpa*, is done after the lapse of a considerable time after the elopement. This is because of the dissension between the two parties. When this mellows down, the two parties want to establish the relationship and for this *Loukhatpa* ceremony is done to have a social contact between the two. This can be performed even after the birth of children of the couple. Before this the couple live as unmarried husband and wife. But these days, a new tradition is in vogue. If a party is not willing to perform the *Luhongba* ceremony, the other party performs it at their own house and locality without the participation of other party. This way the couple become legitimate married husband and wife.

## INHERITANCE

In the Manipuri society the inheritance of the office, dignity and property is Patrilineal though there are certain exceptions. During monarchical days, the inheritance of the kingship was generally by Primogeniture. But this was not followed quite oftenly. So, the rule became such that the strongest member of the royal family held the throne as long as and only just as long as he could and when a stronger man came, his day was done.<sup>37</sup> But it had been a rule that he must be only from the royal clan, *Ninthouja*. Regarding the inheritance of land, the condition was quite clear in olden days of Rajas. The land was held at the will of the ruling power of the state. So, common people could not have an open say on it. But today land of a father is distributed among the sons though the youngest son is regarded as the heir general if, at the time of the father's death, he is still living in the ancestral home. But there is also a mutual understanding that the substantial amount of property, both movable and immovable, should be generally given to those who are most in need of it without reference to seniority or juniority. These days it is also a done thing to give away land to the daughters if the father has more amount of land. All this is divided by the seniormost male member of the family. So, he holds the highest dignity and authority within the household.

## POLITICAL STRUCTURE

The Meiteis have a strong sense of historicity. The present social structure is still tinged by the Past and the common people refer to the history when talked about their social status and same is true for the social status of other people when asked of them. Though kingship had been abolished long time back and the Meitei are under democratic set up, they still have in their minds the idea of political structure of the olden days which they link with social hierarchy. During the native rule the social and political structures of the whole valley and the hills were organized around the king at the centre. Hierarchically the people nearer to the central sphere enjoyed the higher status as compared to the ones who were farther from the core. The whole structure was maintained on the basis of favouritism of the king. Even today, the various ritual behaviour of the people as well as the analysis of the lineage system, the marriage rules and the land tenure system carry the remnants of the political structure that was formed around the traditional institution of kingship.

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<sup>37</sup> *ibid.* p-82

For the time being let us turn the clock backwards and see the kingdom of Manipur with all its Pristine Political set up. The Meitei had very intricate yet systematic organization of the political life. There were as many as forty larger offices or departments attached to the central power of the king<sup>38</sup>. Apart from this there were many smaller offices attached to the villages. The heads of these offices big and small were appointed mostly on the basis of their closeness to the king.

Ranjit Kumar Saha categorises the link between the king and the people into three ways- (1) *Service relationship*, (2) *Judicial relationship* and (3) *Religious relationship*.

### **(1) SERVICE RELATIONSHIP**

In order to consolidate the hold over the subjects and to benefit himself, the king established different services for the people. The services rendered by the people can be grouped into (a) *Fam naiba*, (b) *Lallup kaba* and (c) *Loipot kaba*. They were prestigious, essential and dishonourable services respectively.

#### **(a) Famnaiba-**

The officials under this service, who were called also Famnaiba, were in the customary laws, judiciary, administrative and ministry service. They were mostly the relatives of the king and they constituted the aristocratic group. Since Vaisnavism gained momentum the king allowed the Brahmans also to render ritual service to the king. These people enjoyed many facilities. Their immediate families were exempted from the compulsory service (Lallup). Some of them were entitled to the *Loi-ils* who serve them wherever they went. They also enjoyed '*Yum Tinnaba*' (*Yum* = house, *Tinnaba* = solidarity) where all the members of their group help them to build their houses and their wives were attended to by the wives of the group wherever they moved. But this system was abolished by Maharaja Debendro Singh in 1850. Apart from these, the officials also enjoyed the "*Pot thang*" a free service of carrying the luggages and other materials for the officials by the villagers wherever they went. This system was abolished in 1939.

#### **(b) Lallup Kaba**

The essential service rendered by the common Meitei to the king is called Lallup. Literally it means war club or militia (*lal*=war, *lup*=club)<sup>39</sup>. As time passed by it also began to include Pangans (Muslims) apart from the common Meitei. The whole common Meitei society

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<sup>38</sup> Saha, R. K. op. cit. p-128

<sup>39</sup> Hodson, T. C. op. cit. p-58

was divided into four primary groups called Panna. They were *Ahallup* (the club of the old men), *Naharup* (the club of the young men), *Laipham* (belonging to khaba or bitter from khaba). Later on two more Pannas constituted by inferior Meitei were formed. They were *Hatak phanba* (gatherer of tobacco) and *Potsangba* (watchmen). All the male members between sixteen and sixty years of age were liable to Lallup. Primarily the lal-lup was a military organization, but in the piping times of peace it was made to play a part in the economic life of the country. Excepting the king's family and other officials who served the king, all the common people were treated as lal-mee (Warrior, from Lal=War, Mee=Man). But since Gambhir Singh (1825-1834) there had been organized military regiments specially trained and maintained for the wars which were quite often, mainly against its erst-while enemy, the Burmese. Since then, lal-mee formed a separate division or section of the community.

Generally Lallup was the duty of appearing at the king's office (*Loisang*). Every Panna had to perform its duty for ten days on relation. So, it takes rest for the remaining 30 days. This is the performance of the proper work of the grade to which the person belonged. It is a payless duty though every member liable to Lallup was allowed to cultivate one *Pari* (2 ½ acres) of land for his sustenance but he paid tax to the king in kind. The remaining land was cultivated for the king by the Panna members as part of Lallup.

To secure the due and efficient working of the lal-lup, the six pannas were minutely subdivided into upto 107 divisions<sup>40</sup>. It was the responsibility of the head of each family or tribe to furnish the proper persons for the different services. Different forms of services among the pannas were given based on social hierarchy within the panna. The peeba or the seniormost member of the panna was not subject to any kind of heavy duty. He was called '*Ningthou selba*' or personal attendant of the king. His family has the status of the seniormost family. Next family on the line of seniority was responsible for heavy duty in the *Leikai* (locality). The 3<sup>rd</sup> families constituted the *lalmee* (soldiers). The 4<sup>th</sup> group was called *Sangsa roi* (makers of houses) etc. It is believed that the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> families worked together to make houses and bridges. Since Gambhir Singh's time lalmee of the panna had started performing civil duties. The families below the above families were assigned as *Khootnaibas* or artisans such as goldsmiths, blacksmith etc. Other families were assigned different types of duties (around 27 in number) such as Raja's bodyguard, Musicians and singers, strikers of gongs etc.

The other two pannas were created out of Phoongmai class of the Meitei. The Hitak phanba panna attended to the Raja's Hooka while the potsangba spread the clothes for sitting on.

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<sup>40</sup> *ibid.* p-60

They were basically slaves of the Raja. All the six pannas were divided into two departments each *Sanlen*, the duties meant for the Raja and *Sanguba* or *Laimanai* (in case of the last two pannas) the duties meant for the Rani. But in the year 1892, Major Maxwell, the then political agent announced the abolition of Lallup system. In place of this he imposed land revenue of Rs 5/-, at a uniform rate per Pari of land. A special house tax of Rs 2/- was also levied.

### **(c) Loipotkaba**

Loipotkaba literally means giving of tribute by the lois. It also included the performing of the heavy duties for the king by those lower class people of Manipur. These were dishonourable services rendered by the degraded section of the Meitei, the Loi/chakpa, the Bishnupriya, the Yaithibi and the tribal groups. These people were assigned certain occupations which were considered lowly and were not done by the common and aristocratic Meiteis. These included silk manufacturing, smelting of iron, distilling of spirit, making of earthen vessels, cutting of the poles and beams, manufacturing of salt, fishing, cutting of grasses for the Raja's Ponies. So, Lois of Ithing and Thanga villages were given the profession of fishing in the Loktak lake, those of Ningel village manufactured salt, Shugnu village produced lime, Kakching village melted iron, Chairel village produced earthen pots, the Bishnupriyas supplied grass for the royal stable and ponies.

The tributes were given both in cash and kind. The Lois who produced salt had to give thirty percent of their products to the king. The Lois who gave the tributes in cash were called 'Sel-loi' (Sel=money). The fishers of Ithing and Thanga villages had to pay a tax of Rs 2/- to Rs 4/- monthly. It was a sound economic policy of the king both to increase his royal exchequers and to make the country self sufficient. Though the Lois had to work hard to meet the demands of the king, they were economically well off as they also supplied their products to other people of the land. Even today the Loi villages are economically healthy as compared to other Meitei villages. For instance, Sekmai, a Loi village which manufactures Yu (wine), is a wealthy village and the Chairel village earn a handsome amount from the manufacturing of earthen pots. There is even one saying on Chairel-"*Chairelgi Chaphubu Kainaba Yeibara*". (The pots of Chairel are not beaten to be broken). Its English counterpart would be -"spare the rod and spoil the child." All this is because of their mastery over their craft.

### **(2) JUDICIARY RELATIONSHIP**

Crime and punishment is the core of this relationship. The king and his central offices were responsible for the law and order maintenance. All the village and Pana heads were connected to the central offices. The village head reported every significant event in his village, to

the concerned office in the palace. If any villager committed any criminal social and religious offence he had to report it to the palace and the latter decided which course of actions to be taken. The offences ranged variously. They might be wearing of dress of certain colour, which the king did not allow, to not attending to lallup, to theft, to murder, to treason. The punishment for these were mostly repressive rather than restitutive. The punishment also was very partial towards king's favoured people. The people who did not go for lallup had to pay fines to the officer in charge of the lallup. The most common punishment for the milder offences was the banishment to the Loi villages for a certain period of time so that the offenders became social outcasts. If the period extended for long then they became permanent lois. The theft of cattle was very common offence and the offenders were often excommunicated and sent to the Loi villages. There was severe punishment on the pipeline. If a thief was convicted for second time then his right hand was cut off.<sup>41</sup> The murderer was punished with capital punishment generally. But if the murder was committed by a Brahman then he was banished from the country. If it was by a woman then her head was shaven and paraded in the market place for every body to see her. The highest crime on the land was treason. The punishment for this was death. It was specially done because the king always wanted to ascertain his power and anybody who tried to claim his position was clamped down with iron hand and was shown the way up.

The judicial matters were undertaken mainly by four courts, namely, (1) *Cheirap* (civil court), (2) *Garot* (military court), (3) *Paja/Pocha* (women's court) and (4) *Mangolsang* (the court of the Mohammedan). They had many offices which heard complaints and decided the adequate punishments. Though they were there, the king was the ultimate power to decide any case. McColloch,<sup>42</sup> gave a matter of fact that there was no law in Manipur, the will of the ruling prince was the law.

### **(3) RELIGIOUS RELATIONSHIP**

The reason why there was religious relationship between the people and the king was because the king was the sponsor of the religion both indigenous (Meiteism) and Vaisnavism. In the Prevaisnavite era there was a religious institution called Maiba Sanglen which again had three branches - (1) *Maiba and Maibi Loisang* (the institution of the priest and the priestess), (2) *Maichou Loisang* (the council of pandit or literati) and (3) *Pena Loisang* (the institution of the musicians). All the religious life of that era was operated on the advice from them on both

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<sup>41</sup> *ibid.* p-88

<sup>42</sup> Saha, R. K. p-146



religious and other important matters. Then Pandits were responsible to write the genealogies of the class in Manipur and also the records of the palace (*Cheitharol Kumbaba*).

Since the advent of Vaisnavism in Manipur, the differentiation among the people was charted out by king intimidated by the wily hands of the Brahmins. Those who were favoured were lifted to the higher status and those disfavoured to the degraded status. So, Vaisnavism was not bestowed to the Lois while the Bishnupriyas and common Meiteis were forced to convert to this new and alien religion. So, Brahma Sabha, an institution constituted by a few highly learned (in Hindu sacred scriptures) Brahmins, was started. It took the charge of controlling all the religious aspects in the kingdom and to settle down all related disputes. This strengthened the segmentary ritual structure, which, in turn, served the economic interests of the king.

### RELIGION

Religion has always been a part and parcel of the Meitei social life. Every aspect of life such as politics, fine arts and crafts has never maintained separate existence from religion. Worship of deities by the help of music and dances to ensure the community welfare is part of their belief. The Manipuri thought is often identified with Vaisnavite philosophy. But there is a basic philosophy in existence outside Hinduism. It is a composite culture in which the indigenous religion (*Meitei dharma*) with ancestor worship and nature worship and different Hindu cults are welded together to form a particular belief system. It is a localized Hinduism in which Vaisnavite Meitei is equally devoted to both Shri Krishna and *Umanglais* (Sylvan gods). This is the product of the tolerance shown by the Meiteis to various belief systems. The Meiteis are receptive to any form of worship and welcome the useful and intelligible elements from other brands of religion.

T. C. Hodson concluded that the indigenous religion of the Meiteis is a form of animism. He discovered at least four definite orders of spiritual beings who have crystallized out from the amorphous mass of animistic deities. There are the *Lam lai*, gods of the country side who shade off nature gods controlling the rain, the primal necessity of

an agricultural community. The second category of deities is *Umanglai* or deities of forests (sylvan deities). The 3<sup>rd</sup> one is the *Imunglai*, the household deities, Lords of the lives, births and deaths of individuals. The last category is the ancestor, the ritual of whose worship is a strange compound of magic and nature worship. Beyond this divine beings who possess, in some sort, a majesty of orderly decent behaviours, there are spirits of the mountain passes, lakes, rivers, sky,

stars, Vampires and all the horrid legion of witch craft.<sup>43</sup> But Meitei dharma is not as shallow as simple animism. It has got all the philosophical ingredients of a developed religion. It has a complex system of gods, soul, karma and salvation like Hinduism, which came in later period to Manipur.

Before we go deeper into the core of the religious sphere of the Manipuris, it is deemed pertinent to discover the history of Manipuri brand of Hinduism and its amalgamation with the local religion. Saktism and Tantrism from Bengal and Assam had influenced the Meiteis (Manipuris) by the seventh and eight centuries A.D. Then the second big change came during *Pamheiba* or *Garibaniwaz's* (1709-1748) reign when he was introduced and baptized to Ramanandi cult of Vaisnavism by Shanti Das Babaji.<sup>44</sup> This was a period when there was a great social change in Manipur due to change in the loyalty of religion. This ended some of the animistic practices of the Meiteis but it introduced untouchability and the concept of purity and pollution among the Meiteis. The present creed of Vaisnavism in Manipur is called Gauriya Vaisnavism of Caitanya Mahaprabhu which came to Manipur through the paribar of Narottam Thakur Mahaya of Bengal. This was officially recognized as the state religion by Rajarshi Bhagyachandra (1759-1762, 1763-1798). The supreme god of the Gauriya Vaisnavas of Manipur is Sri-Sri Govindaji, the Manipuri name of Sri Krishna. Besides him is Rajeshwari (Radha) who is equally revered by the Manipuris. They are the head occupants of the Sri-Sri-Govindaji temple, the holiest Shrine of Manipuri Vaisnavas. Sri-Sri Govindaji is the supreme authority in all matters-social, cultural and religions.

As mentioned elsewhere in this chapter, the Manipuris are loyal to both the indigenous Meitei Dharma and Vaisnavism. But T.C. Hodson<sup>45</sup> has something to say, "It is difficult to estimate the precise effect of Hinduism or the civilization of the people, for the outward observer they seem to have adopted only the festivals, the outward ritual, the caste masks and the exclusiveness of Hinduism, while all unmindful of its spirit and inward essentials..... In Manipur where Hinduism is a mark of respectability, it is never safe to rely on what men tell of their religion; the only test is to ascertain what they do and by this test, we are justified in holding them to be still animists." This statement may be true to some extent but if we delve little deeper, then we find that many Meitei Vaisnavas are devout practitioners of Gauriya Vaisnavism. They are quite conversant with the great traditions of the Mahabharata, the Ramayana, the Bhagavad Gita and other Hindu scriptures. This is in addition to their belief and worship of all the local deities.

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<sup>43</sup> Hodson, T.C. op. cit. p-96

<sup>44</sup> Singh, M. Kirti – Religion and culture of Manipur, 1988, Manas Publications, Delhi. P-44

<sup>45</sup> Hodson, T. C. op. cit. p-96

The Meitei words for God are *Chingu* (one who can see the universe by his divine eyes), *Khoyum* (one who has his abode in the navel) and *Lai* (from the word *Laiba* or easy which means the one who carries out his will into action very easily).<sup>46</sup> A major feature of Meitei thought is the ample evidence for Pantheism, henotheism, dualism and monism. At the top, it is monism where the *Sidava Mapu* (Shri Hari) is the ultimate god and all the other gods and goddesses are his manifestations. The dualism of the Meitei theistic system is that all the spirits and deities are classified into *Laingou* (good spirit) and *Laimu* (evil spirit). Henotheism can be seen when all the *Umanglais* (sylvan gods) are addressed as equals in rank. They are considered as the manifestations of the *Sidava mapu*. The Meitei Mind is Pantheistic. In everything of this world they perceive divinity and the deity. They are known to acknowledge the worship of 243 gods and 162 goddesses in addition to the members of the trinity. The Meitei deities reside on the throne, in individual houses, forest, mountain regions, rivers, lakes, mounds, surung (caves), directions, beneath the earth (the god of earthquake) etc. Here we can bring in a similar concept of god from the Nuer<sup>47</sup>. The Nuer call god as 'Kwoth' (spirit). God is considered to be in the sky above and they speak of him as Kwoth nhial or Kwoth a nhial i.e; spirit of the sky or spirit who is in the sky. They do not regard things as spirits. For instance sky is not the god but the god is in the sky. So, Kwoth nhial (spirit in the sky). There are other and lesser spirits which they class as Kuth<sup>48</sup> nhial (spirits of the sky or the above) and Kuth piny (spirits of the earth or of the below).

Though the Meiteis believe in many deities, there are some who are revered the most. As mentioned above, the entire Meitei house has household deities called *Immung lais*. They are *sanamahi* (sun god), worshipped in the south west corner of the house, *Laimarel* (earth goddess) worshipped near the wall just to the north of the *funga* (fire place). Apart from these the ruling dynasty of the kingdom worships *Pakhangba* (moon god) as its family deity. The second category of deities is the *Umanglais* (sylvan gods) who are revered and feared by the Meities. Mention may be made of some principal Umanglais who are considered to be living in all their spiritual glory upto this day. They are *Koubru* (reigning in the north west), *Loiyarakpa* (reigning in the west); *Thangjing* (in the south west); *Wangbren* (in the south); *Marjing* (in the east) and *Chingkheiningthou* (in the north east).<sup>49</sup> They are also known as *Maikei Ngakpa* (protectors of the directions) and are tutelary deities. Though they are called Jungle gods, they do not reside in the jungle. The name is because, their temples are surrounded usually by a rich grove of trees, which look like a miniature forest. These temples are located within or near the localities. They are

<sup>46</sup> Singh, M. Kirti. Op. cit. p-10

<sup>47</sup> Pritchard, E. E. Evans – Nuer Religion. 1956, Oxford University Press. P-1

<sup>48</sup> 'Kuth' – Plural form of 'Kwoth'.

<sup>49</sup> Singh, N. Tombi. Op. cit. p-75

worshipped with the festival called *Lai haraoba* (rejoicing of gods). The third category of gods called Lamlai is not less important. They are deities in the nature. The nature itself is regarded as a goddess and called *Mahousa Lairembi* (Mahousa=nature, Lairembi=goddess). There is worship of *Sorarel god* (sky god) who has his abode in the heaven. The worship of rain (nong) god is one of the most important ritual in Meitei society, which has an efficacious connection. There is involvement of imitative magic in this calling of rain at *Nongmaiching hill* (Nong=Rain, mai=facing, ching= hill). Worshipping of all these above gods and goddesses is carried under the guidance of *Maibas* (priests) and *Maibi* (priestesses).

The Meiteis are ancestor worshipping people. The seven salai (clans) have their own originators called *Apokpa* or *Ningthou* who are either gods or superhumans.<sup>50</sup> All of them have the shrines of their respective originators called Apokpa Laipham. As mentioned elsewhere, all the members of a salai come together at this shrine and worship the Apokpa (Apokpa khurumjaba). Among the originators, pakhangba is the most popular. It may be because, he is the originator of the ruling clan, Ningthouja. The legends say that he used to take the shape of a snake during the day time and shape of moon during the night which means that he was as clever and shrewed a politician as snake during the day time and sool and calm like the moon during the night. To this day also pakhangba is regarded as a snake god. He is, according to the legends, the son of the supreme god sidaba mapu and is revered by all the Meiteis.

The concept of the soul is very relevant in the Meitei thought. In both pre-Vaisnavite and Vaisnavite system the soul is believed to survive the body. According to them death is abandoning of old worn out *Polang* (basket) and the soul assumes a new cloth or polang in birth. Later under the influence of Vaisnavism the ideas of the Gita about spiritual life have entered into their philosophical and religious conceptions.<sup>51</sup> The term for soul in Manipuri language is *Yaibi* or *Thawai* (driver of body) and *Chenga* (inner soul). The belief stresses that not only man but also animals, plants and trees have souls though they are not remarkably developed in them and their soul is called *Thawai Apokna* "old beings".

The Meitei have many theories of soul. The first theory says that every human being has only one soul inside his body as the king to control the impulses and senses. According to this all souls are equal and the emerging of soul with the sky means one's death. Other theory says that there are many souls inside the body of a person. One version says that a body is the abode of five souls along with *mi* (the shadow cast by a person against the sun & the moon light). Probably they

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<sup>50</sup> Names of the originators have been mentioned before in this Chapter.

<sup>51</sup> Singh, M. Kirti. Op. cit. p-21

mean five prannas or life principles of the Hindu thought. All of these souls guard the body both in one's waking and sleeping periods. In another context it figuratively says that five deities namely, Almighty, earth goddess (Leimarel), sun god (sanamahi), moon god (pakhangba) and progenitor of seven salais (clans) became five souls. Some have assumed the five souls to be in the form of functions (1) to feel, (2) to take pride, (3) to awaken, (4) to love other beings and (5) to give rest to the person. They are simply life forces, which control the body and mind of a person.

The passage of the soul from the body is described in a book called *Amam Sikumlol*.<sup>52</sup> After the separation of the soul from the body the soul is taken by *Khamnung Kikoi Louonbi* (a powerful goddess) in the guise of a friend and come to *Khori Keithel*. Here the soul lives on the dish of leaves of *Wandeng Khoibi*, a kind of plant. Then she takes the soul to *Khonghampat* through hilly passages where it is asked to ease itself and to drink water from the pot and to take meal at a fixed place and to wash clothes at *phisulok* (brook for washing) and to comb. When the soul looks back it finds its body dedicated to the flames and there is no hope of coming to life again. Then the cry of lamentation is heard at *Makoi Ningol Ching* (the hills where the soul feels pity and sorrow) and then it goes to the abode of *Thongarel* (God of death). This concept can be matched with the concept of heaven. The Manipuris use the words- *Khamnung Nongdam Yaihikon* or *Laileipak* (country of god) for heaven. The pre-vaisnavite heaven which can be reached through a divine ladder is a place of Sorarel (Meitei counterpart of Indra) or pole star and is situated on the sky far remote from the regions of the sun, moon, and the stars. Another belief says that this region is ruled by *Thongarel* (Yam-ningthou), the presiding god of death.

The concept of Karma is very significant among the Meiteis. They believe that one's present life is shaped by their actions or Karma in this life itself. This is a very practical approach to life. But there is also another belief that one's present life is the result of his past birth. This latter version is connected to the transmigration of soul. They believe that a soul takes birth seven or ten times according to one's deeds. Karma in Meitei thought is not only individual but also communal. One's personal karma influences the karma and fate of a community. So, one has to be careful not to bring down the name of the community.

The Meitei thought gives ample space to the concept of liberation. According to it the soul is described as a bird captured in a painful nest and it gets liberation when it flies to god from where it was sent. To the true Meitei, death (*Nongaba*) means the absorption of the individual personality into the almighty Guru, the highest of the high. This can be equated to Nirvana,

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<sup>52</sup> *ibid.* p-25

Moksa and Salvation i.e; to get relieved from the cycle of birth and death. In the book called *Nongarol* (Ascent to heaven) mention is made of important kings and *Maichous* (Gurus) whose cremations are not mentioned. They are supposed to go straight to heaven, which means they gained Jivanmukta (liberation gained during lifetime) of Hindu philosophy. Again to the Manipuri Vaisnavas more important than salvation is devotion. Nothing short of Prem (love) can give them the pure state of salvation. Prem consists in eternally experiencing the love of god. The ultimate aim and purpose of Vaisnavas is the attainment of the spiritual form of Sri Krishna.

Salvation can be achieved through the practice of life's duties, necessary rite and ceremonies on one hand and able guidance from the gurus. According to *Asilon* (lore of death), there are nine sheaths corresponding to nine colours of the immortal gurus and seven colours, which spring forth from his body and generate seven Salais (clans). Meditation and knowledge on the nature of the concerned sheath and colour (according to the salai in which one is born) are the ways of salvation. It is a Pre-vaisnavite concept and according to this one need not take to ascetic life for salvation. By being a householder one can reach upto god. It is a modern and practical approach to god.

All the above concept of god, soul, karma and salvation are the result of the amalgamation between Meitei dharma and Vaisnavism. In above description, more importance has been given to the indigenous Meitei thought rather than Vaisnavite thought as the latter is well known among people as it is a great tradition.

### MANIPURI WOMEN

The Manipuri women give great contribution to Manipuri society. Their role in economy, social activities, religious rituals and festivals, art and culture is immense. It is unique in a patriarchal society like that of Manipur. But at the substratum the Manipuri society is patriarchal despite the liberty shown to its womenfolk. Though women contribute a substantial amount in all walks of Manipuri life, they still lag behind their menfolk in terms of respect. Their social position is not as high as the roles they play. The sphere of decision-making is still left to the menfolk.

The contribution of the Manipuri women to the economy of Manipuri society is a well known fact. Female labour, however, in one form or another has been the normal feature of Manipuri society from time immemorial. They are involved in various hard works. They are now involved in all the possible economic activities except some heavy ones which are left for the menfolk. From agriculture to trading to weaving to fishing to distilling (in case of lois), women's contribution is immense and matchless, in agriculture all the works like transplantation of paddy sapling( only by them), weeding , harvesting { along with menfolk} etc. are done by them. But

heavy works like ploughing and preparation of fields for cultivation etc. are the avenue of menfolk. They earn little more money by working in others' fields and help increase the family income.

Other economic activity of Manipuri women is the trading which is the sole sphere of them. It is a tradition in Manipur to have a small *Keithel* (bazaar) at street corners or near main roads where elderly women sell vegetables, fish and other eatables. They sell mostly the home products, be it vegetables, clothes etc. The largest centre of trade run only by women in Manipur is called *Sana Keithel* (golden and royal market) or *Ima keithel* (mother's bazaar) at the centre of Imphal city. It is believed to have been founded by *Mungyamba* (1562-1597) in 1580 A.D.<sup>53</sup> Women from all over the Imphal valley congregate to trade their products. This way, they are very wise and enterprising who can not be easily cheated by others. It is a tradition that people laugh at men trading at open market. Men are involved in other trades like ones inside the shops, long distance ones like going to Guwahati or Tamu (Myanmar). But women also have started the latter also. There is no economic field, which is taboo for womenfolk. They have the complete space in this field. This is not a burden for them also. They enjoy being with other women and spend quality time together. So, there is fun interlaced with work. Old women do not feel comfortable idly sitting the whole day.

Weaving is another economic field, which is run solely by the women. All the process from plucking of cotton flowers to ginning, converting the cotton to sliver, spinning, dying and finally weaving are carried out by these skillful women. Traditionally they use loin looms (even now) but today mostly fly shuttle loom (*kon*) is used. It is said a girl can not be married unless she knows weaving and she carries her loom to her husband's house after marriage. The sound of fly shuttle loom is a common phenomenon, even in late night, in a Manipuri locality. Almost every household has this weaving machine. After the clothes are woven with various innovative designs, they are marketed in both local *Keithel* (bazaar) and Imphal city. Apart from the above economic activities, women have great part in fishery, collection of firewood from the mountains, rice pounding at mills etc. Distilling of country liquor in Loi villages is exclusively, an occupation of women.

Manipuri women are socially and politically active. When it comes to driving away social evils like alcoholism, adultery, misbehaviour against women, they are the torch bearers. They are much respected and at the same time feared even by the menfolk. This society, though patriarchal,

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<sup>53</sup> Ghosh, G. K. and Ghosh, Shukla – Women in Manipur, 1997, A. P. H. Publishing Corporation, Delhi. P-27

gives complete freedom to women to engage in such benevolent activities. There are many women associations, which are socially legitimized. Every village or locality (Leikai, in case of cities) has *meira paibi* or *nisha bandh* (association to stop alcohol and intoxicating drugs). They are really powerful that even the army is afraid to face them. So, they are working even to reduce human rights violations by both army and insurgents in this politically disturbed land. The political awareness of the Manipuri women reached its zenith, when they waged war (literally) against the atrocities of the British. The two wars they fought in 1904 and then in 1938-39 are known as *Nupi-Lal* (Nupi=women; lal=wars).

In the religious sphere, the role of women is unmatched. Women are allowed to participate in both worshipping and attending to god and dancing before gods and goddesses. The institution of priestess (maibi) is a unique institution found in Manipur, which is very rare in other societies in the whole world. They are the main attendants of gods and goddesses during Laiharaoba (rejoicing of gods and goddesses) festival. They are considered more important than *maibas* (priests) who also help in successfully carrying out the rituals of Prevaisnavite traditions. From this, the famous maibi dance of Manipur took shape.

The above mentioned spheres are the broad ones in which women have main control. Apart from this, Manipuri women are active in almost all the fields. Manipuri society is opening up quickly to the modern and western world. Modern education is now made readily available to both sons and daughters. They are sent outside the state for higher education and to get exposed to the wider world to be able to fight the tough war of existence and achievement. Most of the girls, both urban and rural, are switching over to the handy and comfortable western wears like jeans, T-shirts, skirts etc. It has to be mentioned here that the Manipuris are very careful in dressing up themselves. They are stylish and trendy. Manipuri women are engaged in various forms of art and games and sports too. Almost all the dances including Rasa lilas are the affairs of women. Then martial arts, football, weight lifting, or any other games and sports have sufficient women participation, which enable them to bring laurels to both Manipur and India.

Manipur is a unique example of women power. The women are allowed to take part in almost all the spheres of life. Even they are more hard working than the menfolk. Despite this huge contribution in maintaining the society they are not still getting the due respect and status in the whole social structure. They are still considered subsidiary to menfolk. But as compared to women of other part of India, the status of Manipuri women is much higher and respectable.



# **CHAPTER 4**

**THE CRAFT OF SHUMANG**  
**LILA AND THE MANIPURI SOCIETY**

'*Roti, Kapada Aur Makan*' – These are the basic needs of a human being. But he/she cannot be satisfied with these alone. To be a human being (nature) is not as difficult as to be a social being (culture), with all the relationships he/she has within the precincts of his society. So, which quality of food one consumes, how good the quality of clothing and what type of shelter one has, all these aspects of living play a vital role in the life of a social being. Apart from satisfying one's natural desires or needs, he has to attend to the cultural side of his life. Bronislaw Kasper Malinowski (1944)<sup>1</sup> argued that apart from basic needs, what a man needs is also integrative needs. For Malinowski, they are traditions, normative standards or values, religion, art, language and other forms of symbolism, which bind the units of a society into a whole. For him, culture is a tool, which serves a functional role to satisfy the needs of the individuals. Symbolism rather than biological imperatives is the essence of human culture for him.

Manipuri society, with all its cultural heritage, is no exception to the above canon, Manipur, for ages, has been a rendezvous for various traits of culture, both exogenous and endogenous. The Manipuris, with their unorthodox mindset, have been giving spaces to people of various cultural and religious adherences. In this process, there has been a traffic of ideas amongst them and result is the cultural mosaic found in this small erstwhile kingdom. The strongest influence, which shook the value systems, symbolic structure, and the way of living and as a whole, the social structure of the Manipuris came from Vaisnavism. But what is intriguing in case of the Manipuris is not their outright acceptance of the new form of religion but the manner this religion has been blended into the already existing beliefs. Their innovative minds have been working relentlessly to explore the untrodden avenues of art and culture taking Vaisnavite philosophies as the superstructure.

Experimenting is the most passionate tool, which guides them to invent new and better forms of art which should be in sync with the taste of their lives, be they performing or creative arts. The sprouting of the seeds of various forms of art and their ceaseless development are due to the effortless convergence of pre-Vaisnavite and Vaisnavite elements and also the link between tradition and modernity.

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<sup>1</sup> Malinowski, B. – A scientific theory of culture, 1944, the University Press, North Carolina, Chapel hill.

The folklore in Manipur can be broadly classified into three categories:-1. Oral Folklore, 2 Customary Folklore and 3. Material Folklore<sup>2</sup>

Under Oral folklore, Manipur has traditional saying (*Chatna-Wahei*), narrative (*Wari*) and folksong (*Khunung-Eshei*). Again traditional saying can be broken into – folk speech (*Khunung-Wangang*), proverb (*Paorou*), riddle (*Paokhong*). Narrative includes myth (*Laitingi-Wari*), legend (*Thaja-Wari*), folktale (*Phunga-Wari*) etc. Under customary folklore, the Manipuris have–folk belief (*Khunung-Thajanabi*), festival (*Kumei-Phiyong*), folk dance (*Khunung-Jagoi*), folk music (*Khunung Eshei-Nongmai*), folk drama (*Khunung-Lila*), folk game (*Khunung-Masana*), folk curing (*Khunung-Laiyeng*) and folk religion (*Khunung-Laininglon*). And under material folklore, they have folk craft (*Khunung Potsa-Cheisa*), folk architecture (*Khunung Yumsa-Keisa*), folk painting (*Khunung Leihak-Leisa*), folk costume (*Khunung Phijet Leithek*), and folk foodways (*Khunung Chakcha-Yuthak*). All of the above forms of art are integral to Manipuri society. They have been transforming themselves with the changing momentum of the Manipuri society.

If we bring in post modern perspective<sup>3</sup>, it can be stated that there are no societies, no communities, no families that exist as fixed entities, only an ongoing stream of conversations, abstract models, stories and other representations as flowing across every level of social life from intimate exchanges between lovers to the product of mass media. Although, some elements in this stream are ‘Privileged’ or given greater weight and social legitimacy than others, ultimately one version of reality or beauty or morality is no better or worse than another.

The art form called Shumang Lila may be conferred the status of the ‘Privileged’ amongst other elements of the Manipuri culture, but cannot be labeled as better than *Phunga Wari* (folktale) or *Khunung Eshei* (folksong). All of them are essentially woven into the very existence of Manipuri society. Shumang Lila can be understood more clearly by keeping in mind the various forms of traditional theatres dealt in Chapter 2.

Shumang Lila is a performative genre under the category of folk (community) theatre. It is, in fact, the most popular amongst the many forms of folk theatres present in Manipur. It is the umbilical cord, which nourished the health of Manipuri society. Etymologically the term ‘Shumang Lila’ is derived from the words *Shumang* (courtyard) and *Lila* (play or performance). Lila, as such, is a Sanskrit term, which denotes the deeds of gods as against those of a common people. Shumang Lila is also known as ‘*Jatra*’ or ‘*Jatra Wali*’, which is an import from Assam

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<sup>2</sup> Singh, Oinam Ibochaoba – Folklore Bigyan (Folkloristics) Part – 1, 1993, Institute of Manipuri Folklore, Imphal, p-56.

<sup>3</sup> Johnson, Allan G--The Blackwell Dictionary of ‘Sociology’ – A user’s guide to sociological language. 1995, Blackwell Publishers Ltd. P-182.

and Bengal as a result of the contact with the mainstream of Indian culture. It is a play which is enacted in an open space – playground, courtyard, mandap (Pavillion) etc. without any raised stage or heavy props like curtain, background scenery, visual effect etc. Its peculiarity, as distinct from the proscenium theatre, is its performing space, which is surrounded from all sides by the audience. It is an island full of lively activities in the midst of a sea of people. Another peculiarity is the inclusion of male transvestites (male actresses) who enact the female roles with terrific accuracy, artistry and grace, which compel the audience to dip into the subconscious space and time, imagining them as real women. Shumang Lila has remained as the most effective medium of mass communication and education among the Manipuris. It is inseparable from their socio-cultural set up. It is a theatre of the people, by the people and for the people.<sup>4</sup> In the field of popularity; it has already surpassed the modern theatre in Manipur.

### **SHUMANG LILA AND OTHER PERFORMING ARTS OF MANIPUR**

Manipur has been a fertile breeding ground for arts and culture. Its ecology has been a driving force for the emergence of unique forms of performing arts. There are other Lilas other than Shumang Lila. This is just a feather in its flamboyant cap. There are many performing art forms, which co-exist with Shumang Lila. So, it is pertinent to address such art forms before we actually delve into our area of analysis – Shumang Lila. Manipuri traditional performing arts can be broadly arranged into four categories:--

1. *Ritual performance* based on ancient customs, which can be brought under the heading of 'Lai Haraoba' tradition.
2. *Krishna cycle plays* – Rasa lila, Sanjenba (*Gosth Lila*), *Udukhol*, *Gouralila*, Sankirtan etc.
3. *Phagee Lila* (farce) tradition, which includes Shumang Lila.
4. *Moirang parva enactment* (the love theme of legendary lovers – *Khamba* and princess *Thoibi* of *Moirang*).

The Manipuri theatre can also be viewed from another perspective as different from the above categorization. If we bring in Western classification of theatre, then we have –

- a. *Ballet*, b. *Opera* and c. *Drama*.

*Ballet* is exclusively a dance form. In a restricted way, ballet is a combination of dance, music and tableaux. But in India ballets with songs existed since long time back. So, ballet in India means a pantomimic depiction of certain mythological, psychological, social and lyrical

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<sup>4</sup> Singh, M. Kirti – Religion and cultural of Manipur, 1988, Manas Publication, Delhi – 110007, p-200

ideas by means of suitable music and song. *Opera* is a story enacted through the medium of music. *Drama*, on the other hand, is a story full of conflicts reaching climaxes, as interpreted through the medium of spoken words i.e., dialogues. Though the media of expression are different, there is always a story, a theme or a central idea in all the above three forms of theatre. In case of India in general and Manipur in particular, the above categories of theatre cannot be confined into watertight compartments. There is osmosis of elements from one another. In case of Manipur, ballet, with its regional style and fervour, and drama are the most popular forms of theatre though opera is in nascent stage.

Now, we can combine the above two ways of categorization with regional variations. *Laiharaoba* performance, *Rasa Lila* dances, *Gouralila*, *Gosthlila* can be loosely grouped into the category of ballet. Under the category of drama, *Shumang Lila*, in its various forms, and *Moirang Parva* enactments can be included. The commonest element, which the *Shumang Lila* shares with the above forms of performing arts, is the type of performing space, which is, as mentioned elsewhere, surrounded by the audience. Now let us take up two most popular forms of folk theatre, one each from *prevaisnavite* and *Vaisnavite* tradition.

***Laiharaoba***:-- *Laiharaoba* (*Lai* means god or goddess, *haraoba* means rejoicing) literally means the merry-making of gods and goddesses. This is exclusively a pre-vaisnavite ritual festival, which is celebrated with sequence of strict rules. People participate in this festival with complete devotion and reverence not to commit any mistake. It is celebrated every year, sometime in April or May, in different parts of Manipur. The celebration is spread over a long period that could last from seven to thirty days.

This festival is the enactment of the origin of the cosmos and creation of human being by the God *Ashiba*, 9 *Lai-Pakhang* (9 male gods in the prime of youth) and 7 *Lai-Nuras* (7 virgin goddesses). This is performed in front of the temples of *Umang Lai* (sylvan gods and goddesses) who are addressed as *Lainingthou* (head god) and *Lairembi* (head goddess). In Manipuri beliefs, they are the guardians of a village or a *Leikai* (locality). The venue of the performance is known as *Lai-Bung* (ground of god). The *Laiharaoba* is celebrated in three varieties due to regional variations:--

1. *Kanglei Haraoba* in spring includes all the rites connected with the romantic life of *Nongpok Ningthou* (Manipuri counterpart of Siva) and *Nongpok Panthoibi* (Manipuri counterpart of Parvati).
2. *Moirang Haraoba* incorporates the rites connected with the life of god *Thangjing* of Moirang

3. *Chakpa Haraoba*, in summer, involves the rites connected with the human efforts to please the highest god.
4. A fourth variation *Kakching Haraoba* exhibits characteristics of both Kanglei and Chakpa haraoba.

Laiharaoba festival must be analysed as a whole, which is constructed with sequences of rituals and dances. The Maibas (the high priests) function as the preceptors, directors and Conductors of the rituals of this festival. On the other hand, the Maibis (high priestesses) execute the dance sequences, which depict the deeds of the gods and goddesses in the creation of the cosmos and human body. According to the Manipuri tradition, the Maibis can be either male or female though they are mostly female. The religious rites, rituals and dances are extremely symbolic, complex and intricate but, fortunately, they are systematically codified with the result that each detail is observed with strict discipline during the performance.

The theatrical elements in this ritual festival can be seen in various forms of Laiharaoba dances. The first day of this festival is ushered in with the ritual of invoking the god from a specified village pond. This is carried out by the Maibis and the Maibas. One Maibi dances, the *Laiching Jagoi*, the dance of summoning the deity. Infusion of the spirits of gods and goddesses from the pond into the urns is followed by the installation of both in the temple. From the next day, onwards a series of morning and evening rituals are performed which are repeated everyday until the end of the whole festival.

The morning rituals<sup>5</sup> include *Lai-Yakaiba*, awakening of the deity, by Pena<sup>6</sup> singers. Then it is followed by *Laimang Phamba* when the Maibi goes into trance and predicts the future of the village. Only a Maibi (high priestess) can utter the words of the god, which are considered very solemn and real by the villagers. Then the morning session is rolled up with *Jagoi Katpa*, the dance by the Maibis. The most important rituals are left for the Evening session. Villagers who are to take part in the ritual turn up in their best traditional costumes. The performances are led by the Maibis and the Maibas. What we call *Laiharaoba Jagoi* or *Maibi Jagoi* (maibi dance) is the coherent weaving of various dance sequences, which are parts of this ritual. It starts with *Thougal Jagoi* to invoke the deity and is followed by *Laiching Jagoi*, which invites deity to enter the bodies of the Maibis. The latter also includes *Leishem Jagoi* i.e., the enactment of the creation of the earth by 9 gods and 7 goddesses. Then, a string of dance performances, under the heading of

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<sup>5</sup> Doshi, Saryu (ed). – Dances of Manipur – the classical tradition, 1989, Marg Publication, Bombay. P-12

<sup>6</sup> Pena is a traditional string music instrument of Manipur.

*Laibou Chongba*, takes place. Once *Laibou Chongba* has started, nobody can leave the temple premises.

The dances by the Maibis start when the participating villagers form a circle. The Maibis depict the love story of *Nongpok Ningthou* (Manipur counterpart of Siva) and *Panthoibi* (Manipur counterpart of Parvati), sowing of human seed in the womb, birth of the child, attainment of maturity, problem of housing, cotton growing, weaving of clothes, fishing, harvesting of crops, play of a ball game etc. All these are symbolically expressed with the help of intricate hand and body gestures. The whole processes are enacted through 364 sequences of hand gestures. The curtain comes down, at the end of the day, with *Naoshum-Eshei* (lullaby) rendered by the Pena players to put the deities to sleep.

Laiharoba festival is a community festival, which arouses the religious devotion, spiritual yearning and ancestral memories amongst the Manipuris. It demands mass participation in the worship of the deity. Apart from its ritual aspects of performances, it has also some ingredients of entertainment. The last day of this festival is specially reserved for some traditional games and sports such as *Mukna* (a form of wrestling), *Sagol Kangjei* (Polo)<sup>7</sup>, *thouri chingnaba* (tug of war) etc. All these give a secular tinge to this, otherwise, ritual festival. The elements of drama on the lines of *Shumang Lila* can be witnessed in the episode of “*Tangkhul Nurabi Loutaba*”, on the last day of Laiharoba. The depiction of the relationship between *Tangkhul* and *Nurabi* demands high theatrical skills on the part of the actor and actress. This episode is packed with humour and erotic dialogues which are accompanied by befitting body languages. So in this episode, elements of *Shumang Lila* can be traced. Laiharoba dance, which was considered to be performed exclusively by the Maibis only in front of temples under strict ritual sequences, has been lured to join the changing pace of time. Now, this dance form has been transported from the precinct of the temple and is taught in the dance institutes. It is now performed on the stage by any dancer (solo, duet, group) for the audience. It, in a way, gives an opportunity to the audience to relish its taste in a different space with a different ambience. It is an effort to establish its own niche in today’s highly competitive and complex world.

### **RASA LILA**

Rasa Lila tradition is the torchbearer of the Vaisnavite culture of the Manipuris in the same manner as Laiharoba is in case of Non-vaisnavite tradition. Rasa lilas are temple ritual dances, which enact the entire gamut of Krishna’s life. They belong to the natya tradition, even

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<sup>7</sup> Manipur is the birth place of Polo.

though they do not conform to the description of *rupaka* (pure drama) delineated by Bharta muni in his treatise, the *Natyasastra*<sup>8</sup>. The Rasa dances belong to the *rasaka* (dance drama), category of the *Uparupaka* (short play dominated by dances) type mentioned in Sharang deva's work, the *Sangita-ratnakara* and enriches the short uparupaka piece in the Natya tradition. As mentioned elsewhere, the *rasa lila* is also a form of ballet.

The *Sankirtan* (a form of community prayer and an invocation of god) is an integral part of religious expression and produces a profound effect on the lives and artistic manifestations of the Vaisnavites of Manipur. For them, it is, really a *maha-yajna*, a great form of worship and prayer. *Rasa lila* is the occupant of the centre stage of *sankirtan*. Its main story is centred around Shri Krishna's Divine love sports with Radha and Gopis (milkmaids) of Brindavan, as explained in the 10<sup>th</sup> chapter of *Srimad Bhagavad*<sup>9</sup>. *Rasa lila* can be, broadly, arranged into two categories viz, *Gopa Rasa* and Shrikrishna's *Rasa lila* with Radha and Gopis. *Gopa Rasa* is the depiction of Shree Krishna's childhood pranks and the exploits with his Gopa freinds, manifesting himself as a lover of cows and proving his worth as the most accomplished incarnation of Vishnu. The second category of the *Rasa Lila* has four forms---a. *Maha-Rasa*, performed on the night of the full moon day of *Hiyanggei* (Kartika or November), b. *Kunja-Rasa*, on the night of the full moon day of *Mera* (Aswin or October), c. *Basanta-Rasa*, on the night of the full moon day of *Sajibu* (Baisakh or April), d. *Nitya-Rasa*, performed any time of the year. *Nitya-Rasa* is subdivided into *Dibarasa* (performed in the daytime) and *Nishi-Rasa* (performed at the night time).

The *Rasa lila* performances follow a predetermined traditional *Kram* (order). Of the four main *Rasa lilas*, *Basanta Rasa* has the most comprehensive and clear five-part structure. It is as follows<sup>10</sup>—

1. Entrance, invocation, prayer;
2. Formation of *Rasa* – *Mandala*;<sup>11</sup>
3. Introductory dances by main characters;
4. Dramatic episodes;
5. Closing rites – prayers and offerings;

In the *Maha-Rasa*, the dramatic episode dominates while others are absorbed in it. The *Kunja-Rasa* does not have dramatic episode and is considered as a prelude to the *Maha-Rasa*. The *Nitya-Rasa* observes all five parts with little emphasis on dramatic episode. Instead, it shows games played in a competitive spirit by Krishna, Radha and Gopis.

<sup>8</sup> Doshi, Saryu (ed.), op.cit. p-8

<sup>9</sup> Singh, N. Tombi – Manipur and Mainstream, 1975, Cheitrebirentombichand Khorjeirup Imphal, p-63

<sup>10</sup> Doshi Saryu (ed.) op.cit, p-32

<sup>11</sup> A *mandala* consists of a series of concentric forms, suggestive of a passage between different dimensions.



Rasa lila is a smooth blending of Pre-vaisnavite and Vaisnavite elements. It was *Rajarshi Bhaghyachandra* (1768-1798) who carried out the commands of Shri Govindajee who blessed him in his dream. He invited Gurus to work on a new form of dance drama based on the Rasa lila of Brindavan. Then, Gurus created a confluence of Pre-vaisnavite tradition of dance as in Laiharaoba, sword and spear dance and the Vaisnavite tradition. In its form (techniques, the costumes, ornaments etc) Rasa lila is indigenous and in its contents (theme of the play) it is Vaisnavite. It is exclusively a religious performance. It is not for showing to the onlookers but is a meditation of god who plays in Brindavan in human form. In fact, one never says that he is going to witness the Rasa but says that he is bowing down before the Rasa<sup>12</sup>.

The king Bhagyachandra wanted the Rasa lila to be strictly a religious ritual dance, which would have nothing to do with entertainment. As a result, the women participants cover all their identities behind very colourful yet stiff and extensive layers of decorative costumes. The devotees immerse themselves into the deep ocean of compassion of shree Krishna and forget the mundane world. They become Gopis who are thirsty to receive the eternal glance of shree Krishna.

The *Shree Shree Govindaji* temple in Imphal is the most revered shrine for the Manipuri Vaisnavites. The *Rasa-Mandap* (Pavillion) of this temple is the venue for performance of three most important Rasa-lila – Maharasa, Kunj-Rasa and Basant-Rasa. These performances are annual affairs. They are presented at Govindaji temple and only after that can be presented at local *Khulak* (village) temple. At Govindaji temple, the images of lord Krishna and Radha are installed at the centre of the Mandap through ritual sequences. The whole performance is enacted around these images, through dance with the soft curling of fingers and gentle body gyrations. The fingers are flexed in such a way that it seems that they do not have bones inside them. The entire performance is carried out with the accompaniment of soothing songs based on the plays of Krishna, Radha and Gopis and the cycle beat system called *tala* (time measure) rendered with *Pung* (Mridanga). It is a nightlong affair starting at dusk and ending at dawn. In one night, the Brindava of yore is transported to the Mandap of the Govindaji and there seems to be no break in time and space. Everything is happening here and now before the compassionate eyes of the devotees.

There is also transportation from the field of efficacy to the field of entertainment. Though the Rasa lila is dominated by efficacious elements due to its ritualistic form and content, the entertainment elements cannot be completely denied. The depiction of the playful exchanges of aaber (colour powder) between Shri Krishna, Radha and Gopis, is a visual treat to all the

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<sup>12</sup> Singh, M. Kirti op.cit, p-174

devotees. It somehow pulls the strings of love, romance and youthfulness inside the heart of every spectator. With the growth of concern to rejuvenate and broaden the horizon of Rasa lila, many Gurus have been relentlessly experimenting with the possibility of transporting this dance drama from the precincts of the temple to the stage. This effort to introduce this to the universal audience was emboldened by the able Patronage of Gurudeva *Rabindranath Tagore*. In 1926, the Manipuri dance was introduced as a course at *Shantiniketan*<sup>13</sup>. For convenience of audience, the nightlong performance has been abridged to a performance of a few minutes. This dance form is a dream for any choreographer. To compete with other classical dance forms of India, a few dramatic elements with faster moves have been incorporated to this, otherwise, slow classical dance form. Despite these new elements, the spiritual and ritualistic fervour is guarded with utmost tact in any performance wherever it is done.

### **SHUMANG LILA AND ITS JOURNEY DOWN THE HISTORY**

As one treads towards the periphery of religious performances, as discussed above, he/she starts entering into the space of secular forms of performances. Here, the elements of entertainment begin to score over that of efficacy. In Manipur, such non-ritual performances can be broadly grouped into three categories – 1. *Shumang lila*, 2. *Phampak lila* (proscenium theatre) and 3. *Street plays*. The most popular and nearest to the masses is Shumang lila. Shumang is a well levelled open space in front of every Manipuri house (both Vaisnavite and other religion followers). The Shumang of every Vaisnavite Hindu's house has a *tulsi* (sacred basil) plant, which symbolizes the goddess Brindadevi, in its middle point. It is known as *Tulsibong*. A place named *Khanglen pham* is earmarked at the extreme right corner of the Shumang. Immediately after the death of an inmate of the house, a temporary hut to keep the body is constructed with bamboo and straws at this particular portion of Shumang. Then the death body is instantly shifted to this newly constructed hut, which is called *Khanglen Shang*. It is considered inauspicious to pass through this portion of Shumang when one is out for a good job<sup>14</sup>. Shumang is a semi-sacred space for the Manipuris. It is the venue of all the religious rituals related to birth to death of a member of a household. It is a place for ritual ceremonies such as – *Soisti* (a ceremony held on the 6<sup>th</sup> day of a child's birth), *Chaumba* (annaprasana, i.e., giving an infant solid food for the first time), *Na-hutpa* (karna veda i.e., piercing ears of an infant), *Lukun-thangba* (upanaya, i.e., sacred thread weaing ceremony), *Luhongba* (marriage), *shradha* (death ceremony) and *phiroi* (death

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<sup>13</sup> Doshi, Saryu (ed).op.cit. p-8

<sup>14</sup> Saha, Ranajit Kumar – Valley society of Manipur, 1994, Punthi Pustak Calcutta, p-38

anniversary). Shumang is a multipurpose space where all kinds of activities other than the religious ones are done. So, Shumang lila also has been given the privilege to be part of this highly revered place called Shumang.

### LAIHARAOPA AND SHUMANG LILA

The Shumang lila tradition is in persistence for centuries in Manipur. The exact date of its origin is anyone's fancy. Still scholars have opined that it originated with the inclusion of "*Tangkhul-Nurabi Loutaba*"<sup>15</sup> on the last night of *Kanglei lai haraoba* celebration. It is an enactment of the repartee between *Tangkhul*, the incarnation of Lord Nongpok Ningthou and *Nurabi*, the incarnation of goddess Panthoibi, when they are out in the field for farming. This episode has all the elements of a Shumang lila performance-humour, mime and pantomimic elements, with simple but meaningful dialogue recitations from rites, traditional proverbs, riddles, sayings, movements and gestures, singing and dancing etc. *Tangkhul*, the main protagonist has to be a highly skillful actor. He has to project a powerful dramatic effect in every part of this episode such as – his incarnation from Lord Nongpok Ningthou; meeting with *Nurabi*, the female protagonist; quarrel between them as ordinary young man and woman; recognizing one another and reconciliation between them; food and drink sequence; *Tangkhul* in drunken situation; seduction of other women and *Nurabi* by *Tangkhul*; reunion of the two in ecstasy; working in the field; gathering of honey bee-hive etc. The above episode is enacted with a tinge of eroticism in dialogues and body movements. All this is enjoyed by the audience who are in complete accord with the moral order that is elaborated in the text.

The episode is believed to have been incorporated in *Lai haraoba* celebration during 11<sup>th</sup> century. According to "*Loiyumba Singyel*", an authoritative book of historical accounts, king *Loiyumba* (1074-1112 AD) introduced a system of Division of labour to his subjects according to their capacities and capabilities. With regard to the bestowing of duties to the *Amaibas* (priest) and *Amaibis* (priestesses), it is mentioned, "... thou, *Amaiba of Salam* (name of a lineage), take the charge of worship of God *Langmei Ching* and take the role of *Tangkhul Sharam Pakhangba* in the *Lai haraoba* celebration. And thou *Nongtol Amaibi*, take charge of the invocation of the god and goddess out of the water, perform your duty in the field and take the role of *Nurabi* in the *Lai haraoba* celebration..."<sup>16</sup>. Apart from this particular episode, there are many elements of

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<sup>15</sup> Ningomba, Narendra – Shumang lila in Manipur – A traditional Performing art form of Manipur, 2000, (a thesis) submitted to the department of culture, Ministry of Human resource development, Government of India. P-2 of 6<sup>th</sup> Chapter

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.* p-3 of 6<sup>th</sup> Chapter

Shumang lila in Laiharaoba celebration itself. The enactment of the origin of the cosmos and human body and other activities by Maibis and Maibas are full of Shumang lila elements.

Shumang lila is a natural development from daily merry-making activities of the Manipuris. The Manipuri community has always been a fun loving community. Once the harvesting is done and crops are stored in the barns, they involve in various means of entertainment in the rest of the years. “*Laipung Yakaba*”, a favourite pas-time for youths at village ground in the evening, is the centre for expressing talents. Every youth is expected to present whatever he is capable of – jokes, songs, dances, mimicries, story telling etc. From this ‘*Paosha eshei*’, a form of folk song, full of wit, humour and erotic dialogues, is born. Apart from this, the various folktales of the Manipuri’s contribute towards constructing the Shumang lila tradition. Folk tales like *Hanuba*, *Hanubi Panthaba* (plantation of calocasia by old man and old woman); *Apanggi wari shingbul* (stories of a fool); *Ningol mawagi wari shingbul* (stories of son-in-law); *hanuba*, *hanubi ngaren kotpa* (fishing by old man and old woman) etc. are the fountainheads of Shumang lila.

### **PHAGEE LILA AS THE IMMEDIATE PREDECESSOR OF SHUMANG LILA**

Since time immemorial, the Manipuri Kings had been having the tradition of keeping court jesters who entertained the king, queen and their family and officials of the palace. These jesters used to enact the extraordinary feats of valour of kings in wars and hunting expedition, before the queen and palace officials. Such enactments used to be known as ‘lila’. The evolution of Shumang lila can be studied under three broad epochs. *First* is the one up to the last war of independence between the Manipuris and the British (1891). The *second* phase is between (1891) and 2<sup>nd</sup> world war. The *third* phase is from the 2<sup>nd</sup> world war and up to the present day.

The lila tradition was revived during the reign of *Maharaja Chandrakirti* (1850-1886)<sup>17</sup> who had court jesters, exactly like the old English fashion of having court jesters to amuse the king and the nobles. These jesters were witty, humorous and gifted masters of improvisation. Very pleased with the simulated actions of his two jesters, *Abujamaba Saiton* and *Kharibam Laishuba*, the king ordered them to give public performance of their comic talents in the Durga Puja festival. The main characteristics of such comic plays were verbal repartee, adducing and cooking up of absurd stories on the spot, the caricaturing of the king and nobles, funny physical contortions etc. The caricaturing of the king and nobles was done in a regal manner, keeping in view the royal ambience. But, it was not unusual to venture out of dignity and bring in some

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<sup>17</sup> Singh, Ayekpam Shyamsunder – Manipuri Shumang lila and theatre, 1980, Manipur Sahitya Parishad, Imphal, p-8

obscene jargons in their endeavour to create stories extempore. Nevertheless, the performances of these jesters were so conjuring that the king pardoned such minor misadventures and even enjoyed them. It is said that not a single plot was repeated in the ten day long Durga Puja performances. Such plays did not have a specific plot and their duty was just to make people laugh. This way 'Phagee lila' (farce) was born in the court of Maharaja Chandrakirti. As time passed by Phagee lila emerged out of the palace premise and started to be performed on Shumangs on payment basis.

In the Phagee lila tradition, the name of a troupe was taken after the leader's name or leader's physical appearance. *Pangamba Phagee* (farce of Pangamba) was after its leader Pangambam Chaoba, *Yotshubi Phagee* (farce of black Tripod) was known after the leader Phanjaobam Chaoba who was as black as soot on a tripod in hearth. The last renowned comedy play of this era was *Chengba Phagee*, after Phijam Bokul. With the demise of Chengba, the era of phagee lila also seemed to have withered away (around 1913), during the reign of Sir Churachand Maharaja (1891-1941).

Phagee lila gave way to new forms of Shumang lila. Shumang lila in its various forms scaled its height during the reign of *Sir Churachand Maharaja*. During his reign, Ramlila, Sabha parba, Kichak parba, Prahlad charit etc. were performed. They were all performed in fashion of Shumang lila though artistes were all present on the peripheries of the performing space instead of emerging from the green room. Then came the Kabul lila<sup>18</sup>, which was the imitation of the behaviours of Pathans who came with British. It was more of comedy with mixture of English, Bengali, Hindi, Manipuri and even Burmese languages. The dialogues and songs were not understood by the audience.

For instance – The song:--

*"Nandi Khela he, Khela he jangee gigi Pannaro...*

*Allabika Pannaro, Yona Yona ro....."*

Or

*"Amroda Angreji hasking for,*

*Something hecting fining no,*

*Shamphro fellow twenty Niskalo hecting fining no....."*<sup>19</sup>

These words are non sensible and do not have any authentic meaning which the audience could grasp. Interlacing of a few English words in day-to-day conversation became a fashion during this particular period of history (first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century). The Manipuri society came

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<sup>18</sup> *ibid.* p-12

<sup>19</sup> *ibid.* p-24

under the influence of English education and those people who had been exposed to such environment thought it highly educated to use one or two English words. Using of such words as “You”, “understand”, was very common. This was an effort to create a status group consisting of a few English educated people vis-à-vis the illiterate masses. That was a very impressionable period when the Manipuris thought that the grass was greener on the other side and many external cultural traits were accepted without much scrutiny.

### **BIRTH OF MODERN SHUMANG LILA**

The real Shumang lila with maximum number of rasas (sentiments) was ushered in with the epic play *Harishchandra*, performed for the first time in 1918<sup>20</sup>. It was not based on any written script. The guru who directed the play dictated the dialogues and the artistes got them by heart. It had all the ingredients which the Manipuris identify themselves with-patriotism, compassion towards fellow members, satisfaction from whatever one gets etc. It had *Karuna-rasa* (painful sentiment), *Vira rasa* (sentiment of valour), *Hasya rasa* (comic sentiment) and so on. The interludes it had were huge successes with the audience. So *Harishchandra* played was the first Shumang lila, which took the Manipuris by storm. With this a train of multi rasas Shumang lilas followed. Mention can be made of *Sabitri-Satyavan*, *Thengu lila*, *Meiraba Charan*, *Thok lila*, *Chandrajini*, *Satya Charit*, *Moirang parva* (both old and new) etc.

Shumang lila presentations were not without the iron hand of the Maharaja. There were strict decorums and mannerism, which were to be obeyed by the artistes during performance<sup>21</sup>. Nobody was allowed to use half pant, half shirt and red clothes. Both buttons for the neck and wrists must be fastened tightly, the front tuck of the dhoti not to be let loose. By way of mannerism, those playing king or minister must not stand up or sit cross legged and touch the two arms of a chair. But such serious decorum and mannerism were eased off in the presentation of interludes (thok lila), which made mockery of autocracy of king with satirical speech and songs. These served as a healthy outlet to unleash the suppressed feelings of the people.

As mentioned elsewhere, the innovative minds of the Manipuri have never been stagnant. Both the artistes and gurus have been seeking new ways to entertain people. One successful effort in this regard is the enactment of *Moirang parva* (epic of khamba and thoibi of moirang) in shumang lila style. It was a refreshing change from the one, which was rendered through pena (a type of fiddle) songs. People have a tremendous enjoyment in seeing the legendary actors

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<sup>20</sup> Ningomba, Narendra, (2000) – Chapter-4, p-2

<sup>21</sup> Singh, M. Kirti op.cit p-202

perform in front of their eyes. The dialogues are rendered in form of *khutlang eshei* (folk song). So this form of Shumang lila can be given the status of opera. Then a form of highly stylized dialogue delivery developed in these presentations. This style is so appropriate to these forms of presentation that the latter cannot be performed in any other style. It is tasteless when it is performed with straight dialogue delivery. So both forms of Moirang parva-Moirang parva ariba (old version) and Moirang parva anouba (new version) – became immortal with the Manipuris.

### **SHUMANG LILA IN POST WORLD WAR-II ERA**

The year 1942 was a turning point in the history of Manipur<sup>22</sup>. Imphal city looked like a ghost city with the British army and a few economic adventurers and opportunists, as a result of the bombing by the Japanese. There was mass exodus from Imphal to rural areas. The old feudal economy was shattered and drastic changes in people's lives were gradually felt. It was just not conducive to engage in community entertainment activities during that volatile period. But by 1945, the condition became normal and people started returning to their native places. Thus, there was resumption of theatre and Shumang lila. With this new dramas started to be performed. There were two streams of Shumang lila. The first one was *pauranic/ folk type* with techniques and stories of the past. Mention can be made of *Bhagyachandra shamu phaba* (taming of a wild elephant by king Bhagyachandra); *Puran mei thaba* (burning of the meitei scriptures); *Paona Brajavasi* etc. The *second* stream was social dramas based on the condition of contemporary society and culture. 1950 was a landmark in the history of Shumang lila when fully scripted plays – '*puranmei thaba*' and "*B.A. mapa lamboiba*" (the ordination of monkhood by father of a B.A) – were performed for the first time. Since then, plays with scripts have been performed.

During this reign of maharaja Bodhchandra (1941-1955) there was an attempt by people with external influence to identify Shumang lila with jatra of Bengal and Assam. Some even tried to show that Shumang lila was an imitation of jatra. But this did not gain much momentum as people had already been used to the familiar name Shumang lila. Under the king's patronage, Shumang lila troupes were allowed to tour Meitei inhabited areas of Assam and Bengal so that this art form was made popular among these people who were socially and culturally connected to the land of their ancestors. This gave a golden chance to these Manipuris outside Manipur, to search their cultural heritage, which, otherwise, would have been disconnected from them due to territorial separation.

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<sup>22</sup> *ibid.* p-203

## **BIRTH OF ESHEI LILA TO COMBAT THE ONSLAUGHT OF ADVANCED MEDIA OF ENTERTAINMENT**

During 1970-90, Shumang lila had acquired a comfortable growth among the people<sup>23</sup>. The main reasons for this could be its realistic approach, be it the new style of language and dialogue delivery or its content. Most of the plays addressed the contemporary economic, social and political issues which immediately scored the right chord with the audience. The bold presentation of the unemployment problem that has been plaguing the state; population increase; rampant abuse of law by the so called guardians of the democracy; the ever present family problems etc., all these made the audience think this form of art as their own.

In an effort to augment the aesthetic elements, many troupes experimented with playback singing, which was interspersed at right time in the performance, on the line of Bollywood movies. This form of Shumang lila came to be known as *Eshei lila* (song play). The first few greatly popular eshei lilas were *Krishna Bal lila* (1975), *Thadoi* (1976) and *Chaktheipi* (1977). They used musical instruments such as tabla, dholak, harmonium, guitar, flute, violin, keyboard and various others, to give befitting background music for scenes enacted. This shows how music is important to effect a good presentation. The song and dance sequences are so intricately rendered that they invited a huge applause from the audience. Such live performances are competent substitutes for the Bollywood movies.

Two broad categories of Shumang lila emerged viz; - 1. *Dialogue lila* (play without background music) and 2. *Eshei lila*. But these two forms were renamed and recognized by Manipur State Kala Academy as 1. *Ariba Shumang lila* (old type of Shumang lila) and 2. *Anouba Shumang lila* (contemporary Shumang lila). The rapid growth of Eshei lila becomes a major reason for the downfall of Ariba Shumang lila. The audience feels that the latter is a little out of time and tasteless after being exposed to the colourful world of Eshei lila.

### **COMPOSITION OF SHUMANG LILA**

Shumang lila is a highly evolved form of theatre, which is structured under the format of total theatre. The true essence of total theatre lies in the sufficient provisions of using poetry, music, dance, song, mime, pantomime, the intermingling of the epic and lyric poetry with

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<sup>23</sup> Ningomba, Narendra, (article) – No Stops for Shumang lila, 7<sup>th</sup> March, 1995, The Eastern Herald Tribune.



narrative and dramatic elements, freedom from the units of time and space, emphasis of imagination, a highly stylised and choreographic poses and movements of the actors, conventions of speech such as alteration of prose and verse dialogues, a stylised recitative and rhythmic mode of delivery and multiplicity of delivery patterns etc.<sup>24</sup> Total theatre, thus, is a whole, intricately woven by above parts. These multiple levels of conventions make the audience relish the taste of this theatre form time and again. Composition of Shumang lila is the articulation and orchestration of all the sights and sounds of its theatrical presentation. A composition necessitates six ingredients:- a., *Performing Space* b. *Lighting*, c. *Music*, d. *Props*, e. *Acting* and f. *Audience*<sup>25</sup>.

The performing space of Shumang lila is a 13/13 ft. area in the centre of a courtyard or ground or mandap or a place at the bank of a river etc. It is surrounded from all sides by the audience. This performing space is supposed to be the temple of Hari Krishna<sup>26</sup>. No artiste can dare to put on shoes (socks are allowed) when he enters this arena. No spectator is also allowed to do so, although we can multiply such instances of using shoes in the modern theatre. Though advanced techniques of production have been introduced in Shumang lila, this convention of politeness is preserved. As a mark of reverence to the god, a small *arti* is done in the centre of the performing arena where incense sticks are burnt and betel leaf and nut on a circular plantain leaf is offered, before the play starts.

Like any other traditional theatres of phase one and two, Shumang lila does not have a large number of props. The props of this space of Shumang lila include one or two chairs and table. They may serve as the king's throne or the seat of nobles or bed or mat or bench or hearth or branches of a tree or anything which one can imagine of. There must be a symbolic communication between the performers and the audience in order to project the desired end. The depiction of the performer must match with the imagination of the audience. The expression of the performer is successful when it is able to communicate to the audience.

The position of chairs and the table depends on the direction of the small passage, which serves as both entrance and exit. This passage connects the performing area to the green room, which is a few yards away from the performing arena.

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<sup>24</sup> Ningomba, Narendra (2000), Chapter-3, p-3

<sup>25</sup> Singh, Dr. Nongmaithem Tombi (article) – Shumang lilagi Production design (Production design of Shumang lila)

<sup>26</sup> Singh, M. Kirti op.cit, p-210

Position of the chairs and the table can be shown as follows<sup>27</sup>:--

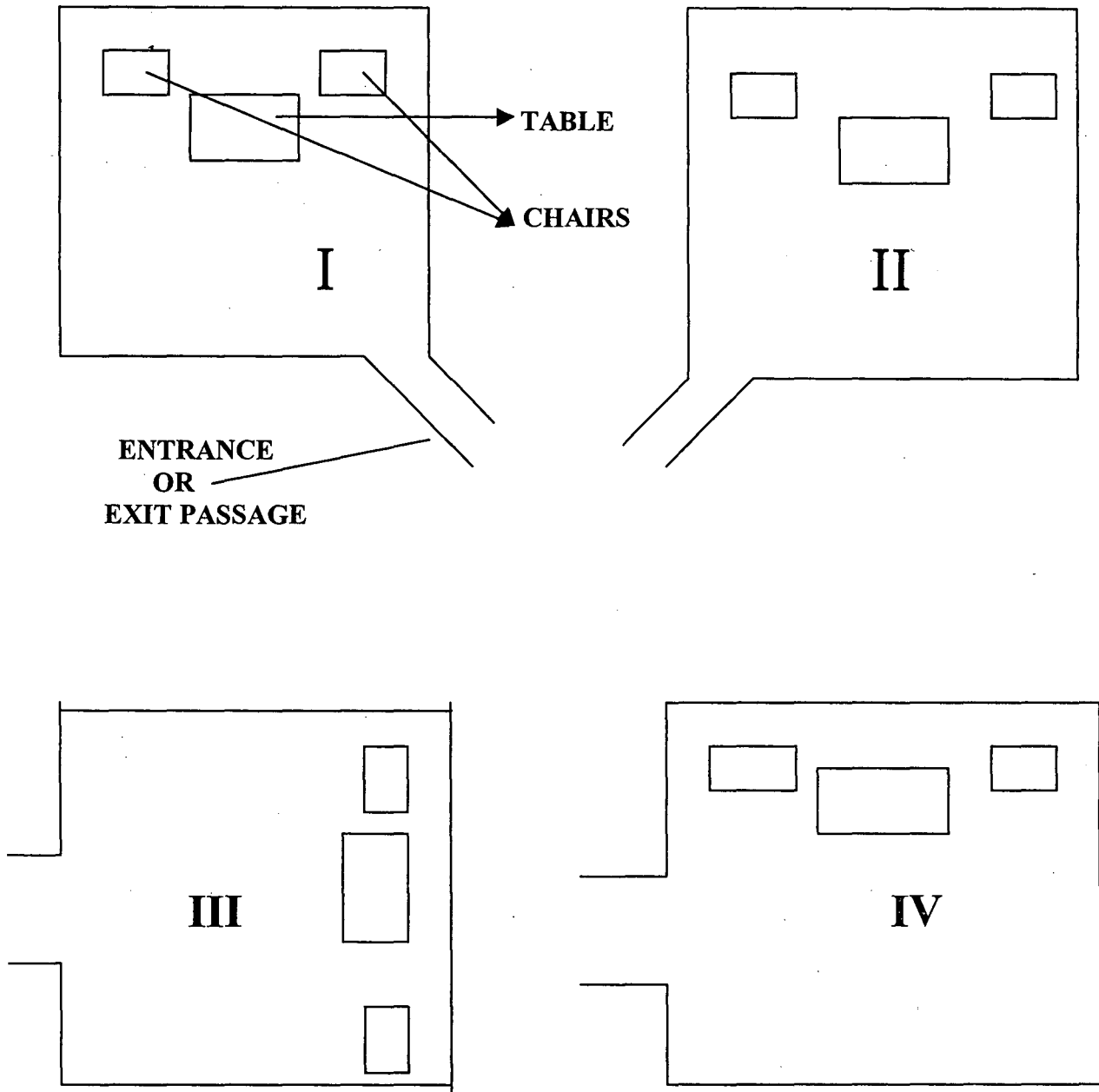


Fig.3 Performing space of Shumang lila.

At the centre of the performing arena, two poles, joined at the two tips by a bar are erected. This bar serves as a hanger for half-lamp or Patromax or tube light and also for the microphones.

<sup>27</sup> Ngangom, Birjit (article) - Shumang lilada directiongi Oiba Wakhel amasang Miyeng khara (The role of direction in Shumang lila)

In case of Eshei lila, the orchestra party (including singers) is seated at one side, at the periphery of the performing space but not behind the chairs and the table. The green room may be a room of a house or a temporary hut made of tin sheets or samiana. The green room also serves as additional place of background activities like shouting, bursting of crackers and making of bullet sound in sync with the activities in the performing arena. In a ticket show, the whole area is surrounded by opaque walls made of either tin sheets or samiana, which has one entrance for the entry of audience.

Performing in a Shumang lila is not an easy task. An artiste has to be bold and confident not to be overcome by the overpowering audience. He is very vulnerable and enjoys his performance as long as he satisfies the audience. Otherwise, he can be a victim of mass frenzy. This means, he gets bouquets when he is sincere in his duty and bricks when not. So, satisfying and living up to the expectation of the audience is the foremost priority of an actor. The dialogues he delivers must be audible. In the pre-microphone age the artistes had to labour hard, to make their voices heard. Advent of microphone made their task easier but this made the acting not free as before. Shumang lila needs the actors move around constantly so that they can be seen by audience. But, due to the installation of microphone, the actors have to be near them when delivering the dialogues. This limits the free movement. So, the composition of a Shumang lila must be done keeping in view of such intricacies. Though Shumang lila is less intricate as compared to proscenium theatre in terms of props and choreography, there are few rules, which augment the aesthetics of a production, when followed properly. The performing space can be surgically sliced into strong and weak positions. The strong positions are the ones, which can attract the attention of the audience instantly. For instance, when an artiste enters the performing arena through the entrance, all eyes are glued towards him. The weak points are the places away from the performing space.

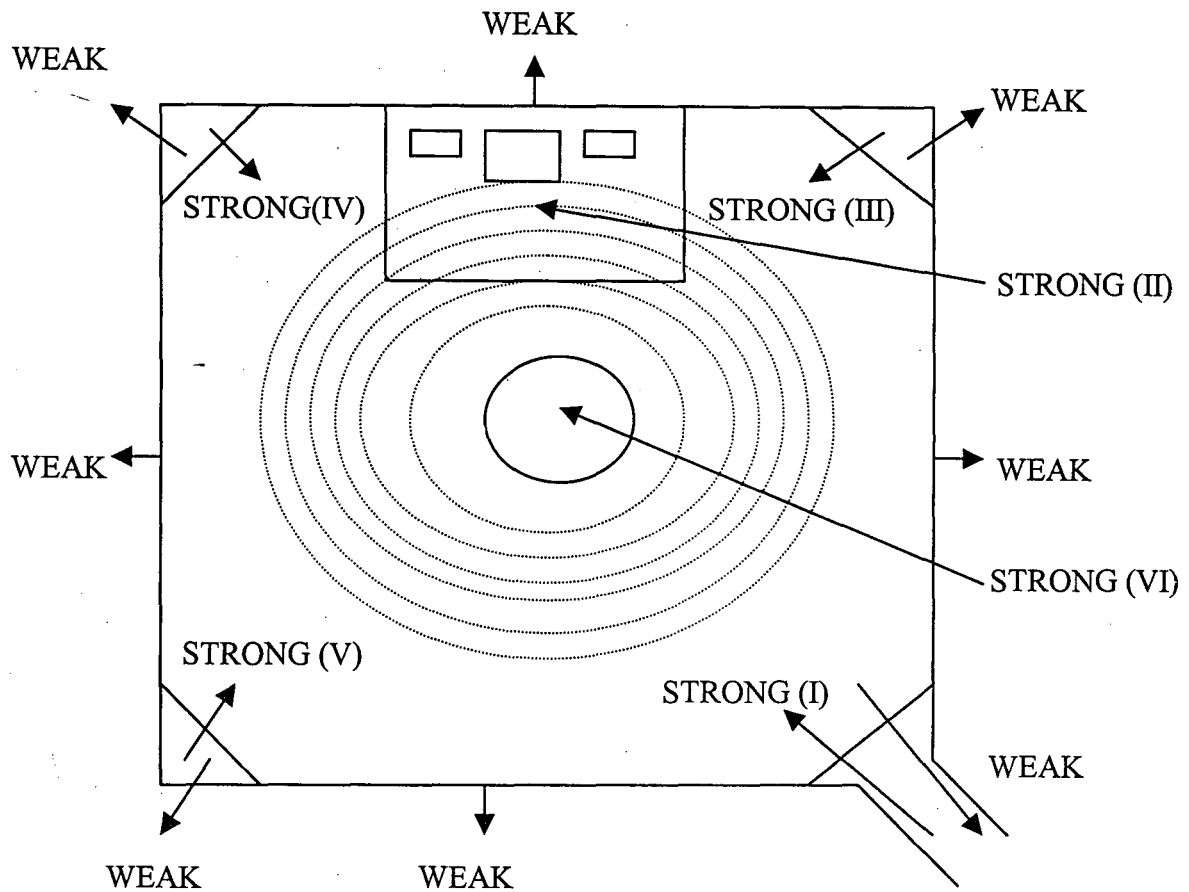


Fig. 4.<sup>28</sup> Strong and weak points on the performing space.

### PERFORMANCE OF A SHUMANG LILA

A Shumang lila is performed by a touring band of 12-13 professional artistes. They perform on invitation by local groups or a wealthy person who give them *Dakshina* (payment in case). Being secular in character, it is not seasonal unlike religious plays like Gauralila, Rasa lila etc. It is performed the whole year, though the frequency is high during two festival seasons – *Yaoshang* (Holi) and *Durga Puja* (October-November). The performances up to early 1970s

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.*

were usually done in the night and lasted around three hours. Today due to the growth of demand they are performed even in day time.

Traditionally, the presentation of a Shumang lila starts with singing the glory of *Meitei Leima* (goddess of Manipur), by a few members of the troupe, using a dholok and cymbals. This is called *Kouwaj*<sup>29</sup> and goes as follows:-

*“Meitei Imagi Mingkhei Sholashe” (a cry by the leader)*

*Sholase!! (reply by chorus)*

*Alap:--*

*Ho, Ima Chingtam Pokpi Nungshibi Ima.*

*Mukhara:--*

*Meitei Ichill Inaosha*

*Imagi Khongul lirushi lao,*

*Mikha Ponba Oiraduna*

*Kumja Kaya lotlurabi,*

*Imagi Khongul lirurashi lao.*

*Antara:--*

*Paona, Thangal Pokpini,*

*Tikendrajit ki mamani,*

*Macha Kaina Meichakna*

*Kaina meisha langhourabi,*

*Imagi Khongul lirushi lao,*

*Kumja kaya lotlurabi*

*Imagi khongul lirushi lao”.*<sup>30</sup>

These can be loosely translated in following way:--

*“Let us sing the glory of the mother Meitei Leima” (By the leader)*

*Let us sing !! (chorus)*

*Alap:---*

*O! mother, beloved mother of both the highlanders and valley dwellers.*

*Mukhara:--*

*O! Meitei brothers and sisters!*

*Come; let us trace the footprints of our mother,*

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<sup>29</sup> Singh, Ayekpam shyamsunder op.cit, p-10

<sup>30</sup> Provided by Ningomba, Narendra in a personal interaction.

*Who had been captured and tortured (by the foreign invaders)  
Who had hidden for ages!  
Come; let us trace the footprints of our mother.*

*Antara:--*

*She is the mother of Paona and Thangal  
And also of Tikendrajit,  
The mother who has been bearing  
the pang of the martyrdom of her brave sons,  
Come; let us trace the footprints of our mother,  
Who had hidden for ages!  
Come, let us trace the footprints of our mother”.*

After this Kouwas is over, they sit on a mat in one side of the performing arena and sing a song saluting the audience. This is called *Beitha* and goes like this:

*Leikhal Naina Pareng Pareng  
Lengjare loubiyu Ima,  
Numitna thorakpa angouba korouda,  
Thoujalgi irikshu khikpiyu Ima,  
Leikhal naina Pareng Pareng  
Lengjare loubiyu Ima”*

=> *“O! mother, please accept the garland of mosaic of flowers  
In the bright glow of the rising sun,  
Shower upon us thy compassion, O! mother;  
O! mother, please accept the garland of mosaic of followers.”*

This tradition of Kouwas and Beitha is intact in Ariba Shumang lila performances. But this had been done away with in Eshei lila. Instead of this tradition the Eshei lila troupes have introduced modern songs, both film and non-film, before the play, actually, starts. This is an example of grafting modern elements into this, otherwise, traditional form of performing art. Purists lament this as degeneration. On the other hand, non-conformists welcome this as a need of the day, to compete with T.V., cinemas and modern theatre. Experiment is, always, done in Shumang lila. The directors have been playing with the innovative ideas to serve the aesthetic demands the people. The masses are good judges and plays run as long as they accept them

## SHUMANG LILA TROUPE AND ITS COMPOSITION

The role of shumang lila troupes in retaining this folk theatre is pivotal. They have been entertaining the people, traveling the breadth and length of Manipur for decades. The artistes are devoted to their art and are experts in their craftsmanship.

Shumang lila troupes can be categorized into two category, based on sex:--

- (1) *Nupi shumang lila* (female troupes)
- (2) *Nupa shumang lila* (male troupes)

(1) **Nupi shumang lila**:- The place of women in social and economic spheres is more respectable in Manipuri society as compared to the status of women in caste based Hindu societies of the parts of India as discerned in the previous chapter. Though the Manipuri society is patriarchal in structure, ample amount of liberty is given to the women so that they occupy a reasonably high status. Taking this as a base, women ventures out of their kitchen and take part in cultural activities. The high status the *Maibis* (priestesses) occupy in Laiharaoba celebration is a well known fact. But the advent of Nupi Shumang lila troupes is comparatively recent (in 1970s). The actresses are not as professional as their male counterparts in the sense that they do not go to far off places to perform regularly. This emergence of Nupi lila troupes is an attempt to unleash their hidden artistic talents which, otherwise, would no in obscurity. It is a movement of uplifting the status of women in every possible field. It is also a movement in parallel with the Nupa Shumang lila troupes.

As convention goes, the female troupe is constituted by only female artistes. They also play the role of men wearing male dresses like *dhoti*, *kurta*, *koiyet* (*pagari*) etc. Their performances are limited to the nearby localities unlike male troupes who travel all over Manipur. It can be because of their family responsibilities as wives, daughters, daughters-in-law etc. It was during the drama-jatra festivals in 1976 that they began to contest in the jatra competition. There are as many as 20 Nupi lila troupes at present, out of which *Meidingu Khagemba Nupi Jatra* deserves a special mention. The plays these troupes perform are mostly from Moirang parva. The plays they perform are also mostly Ariba Shumang lila or dialogue lila. On the line of male troupes, they have also introduced musical instruments and playback singing. But the male voice is rendered by male singers only and the musicians are also mostly males. So, it has become a peculiar form of entertainment in Manipuri society. The A. I. R Imphal has immensely contributed to the popularization of female Shumang lila by broadcasting their plays. So, it is a healthy way of competing with men folk and a step towards a modern society.

(2) **Nupa Shumang lila:-** The male troupes are the torch bearers of Shumang lila. In earlier days troupes used to be known by the name of the troupes' leaders but since around 1950, there have been troupes with their proper names. There developed a professional approach to this folk theatre. A troupe began to have a committee of its own which was registered under the state government. The number of troupes has been growing as youths with artistic talents are joining this field as an alternative profession. At present, there are around 20 registered Nupa Shumang lila troupes performing at nook and corner of Imphal valley. Eshei Lila troupes are gaining momentum in leaps and bounds as the dialogue lila is in its twilight days. The role of music in Eshei lila is immense and more intriguing is the male singers in female voice. One will be awestruck to hear the songs in female voice rendered by them. People even prefer to hear *Khumbong Naba* to any of the female singers of Manipur.<sup>31</sup>

Due to the growth of the number of troupes and complexity in production, there arose a need to bring all the troupes under one umbrella. The first such step was taken up by Manipur Jatra association, which was established in 1971<sup>32</sup> by the lovers of Shumang lila. In the succeeding year (1972), the Manipur State Kala Academy was established to boost the growth of art and culture. It started organizing festivals, both for stage drama and Shumang lila (dialogue one) in different times of year. Around 1975 Eshei lila came into the picture. Initially it was looked down upon by the purists and traditionalists including State Kala Academy. So, the latter refrained from including Eshei lila as part of Shumang lila festivals. Seeing their indifference towards this new crop of Shumang lila, Manipur Jatra association started organizing festival for only Eshei lila since 1981. In 1984, Manipur state Shumang lila Council was formed as an apex body to cater to the growing demands of these troupes. This replaced Manipur Jatra Association and started organizing Eshei lila festivals too. Due to growing popularity of Eshei lila among the people, the Manipur State Kala academy also had to give in to the demand of Shumang lila council and in 1989, it included Eshei lila as a separate category in its festival. In 1992, the dialogue lila and Eshei lila were merged together and known as Shumang lila. Since then, Academy has been organizing festival in cooperation with the council. February and March is the festival season for Shumang lila. There is a division of labour between Academy and Council. The task of financing and fixing the venue for festival are given to the Academy while the council has the responsibility or collecting scripts, scrutinizing them, screening of troupes and other little things required in Shumang lila production.

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<sup>31</sup> See the Appendix for the names of the Shumang lila troupes.

<sup>32</sup> Information given by S. Hemanta Singh, the Current President of Manipur State Shumang lila Council.



Festival season is a hectic time for the troupes. They have to choose the finest scripts, rehearse them under able directors, and see if the music is made accurate with the performance and so on. As troupes are professionals, the success in the festival is considered to be a ticket to the good show throughout the year. This may be a myth as there have been many cases where a play is loved by the people immensely though it does not fare well in the festival. It may be because of the difference in the way of judging. These festivals are judged by a panel of scholars and experts in the field of theatre. Their perspective towards the plays may be a class apart from that of the masses. But in case of Shumang lila judging by the people is more important than that of experts. Despite such facts, some troupes are seriously engaged in lobbying and bribing so that they may bag the first three places

### **DIRECTION – THE INFUSION OF SOUL INTO THE BODY OF SHUMANG LILA**

Production design is the process of giving life to a performance. A good play depends substantially on how production design is done. Production design is a holistic arrangement of acting, music, props, audience etc. It is a total visual arrangement in which all the parts are coherently put together to give a well-organised look. A well produced Shumang lila is like a well architected mansion whose beauty is the end result of the contributions made by each and every door and window or pillar or tile or painting it has etc. It is not fruitful to add whatever techniques or props are available to Shumang lila. Shumang lila demands a tactful handling since it is folk theatre different from the modern theatre. A good production depends heavily on good direction. A director has to be innovative, creative and good craftsman, to give a good show, which may linger on inside the mind of the audience. The essence of theatre lies in the reaction it gets from the public or audience. No matter how excellently a play is performed, it will not be successful if it does not create good impression upon the audience. So, Shumang lila has audience performing along with it. A good direction has to incorporate five points<sup>33</sup>---

1. *Orderliness* – Coherent connections of the plots and scenes, no performing etc.,
2. *Clarity* – Clarity in language, voice, theme, body language etc., No complex symbolic depiction should be included as the spectators in the audience of the Shumang lila is diverse ranging from scholars to the illiterates.
3. *Attractiveness* – It is an effort to attract the attention of the audience towards the play. It may be done by attractive cloths, nice music, attractive dialogues or attractive fight sequences. It is an instant conjuring of the spectators.

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<sup>33</sup> Singh, Nongmaithem Tombi (article)

4. *More theatrical* – This is not synonymous with attractiveness. All attractive renditions may not be theatrical too. It is the accurate application of what is called performance behaviour. It is the belting out of right action at the right time in tune with the continuity of the play
5. *Composition* – It is the coherent organization of the lighting system, music, acting, the performing space and its props.

To understand the moods and whims of the audience is a tedious job. Even the greatest director or dramatist has been beaten in this game, which he thinks is his own area of interest. What a director can do at the most is the excellent and intelligent use of permutation and combination. A script may be excellent but it may not have that theatrical touch. So, it is the sole duty of a director to make it presentable by making modifications in the original text. The direction of Shumang lila is more difficult than that of a modern theatre. It has to keep audience in mind all the time. The movements of the actors have to be in such a way that they are viewed by everyone in the audience. This means every part of the actor's body has to act. There is need of constant movement. Directors have to keep all this in mind.

Direction has been in vogue in Shumang lila since very early days. Since it has only one passage meant both for entrance and exit, the direction is made in such a manner that an actor coming out from inside a house should go to the right side and one coming in from outside should go to left side of the performing arena.

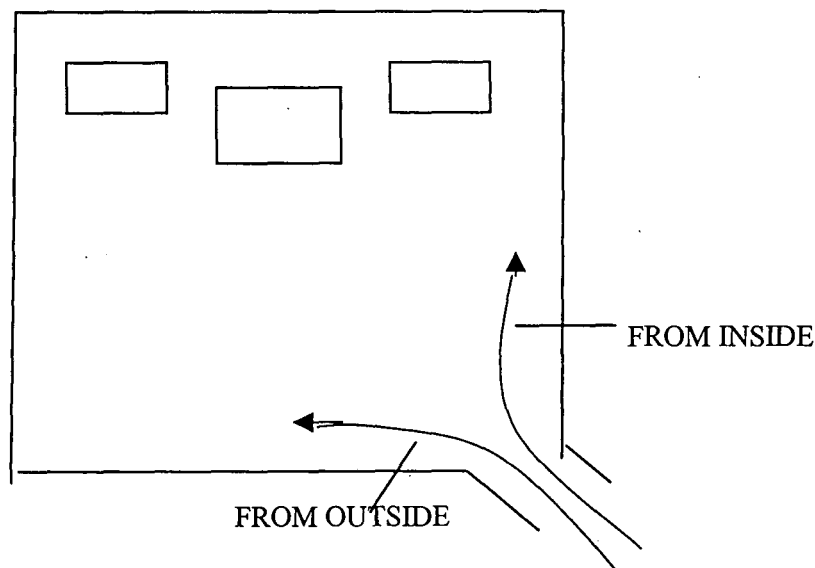


Fig. 5. Directions of movements of actors

In earlier days, there was also a convention that the dialogues should be rendered in a style, which is different from that of normal conversation. There started a new trend, which introduced the realism. The new crops of directors felt that the drama presentation must be natural and not stimulated. This is, in a way, due to the advent of stage theatre directors into this open house called Shumang lila.

Shumang lila is a form of theatre with a heavy use of a codified sign system. The structure itself necessitates the elaborate use of pantomime. The performing arena is everything from heaven to hell, post office to the kitchen. All this is done in this open space with sheer artistry of the actors under the able guidance of the director. The symbolic representations are made more effective and attractive with the background music. The rushing out of tap water, sound of aeroplane, sound of birds etc. is presented in a convincing manner. There is also the unique technique of simultaneous presentation of two scenes in the same performing space. For instance, the scene of the kitchen is shown in parallel with that of the bazaar in perfect way.

Among new crops of able directors, the name of Birjit Ngangom deserves a mention. He makes his play extremely realistic<sup>34</sup>. He extracts the natural performances from ~~within~~ the actors. He makes use of 'Thangta', a traditional form of martial art of Manipur. Maximum body flexibility needs proper training, which is given by 'Thangta'. Apart from this, he applies the Avant-garde techniques to experiment with new things. Sometimes, he adds dialogues addressed to the audience and if needed the actors converse with the audience. It gives the audience the feeling of participation, not just a silent spectator. So, a Shumang lila's hit or miss depends on the tactful handling of this medium by the directors.

### **SCRIPT WRITING – THE MAKING OF BODY OF SHUMANG LILA**

The modern Shumang lila has borrowed many techniques from the proscenium theatre. The types of themes it presents are also presentable on the stage. The main difference of it from the latter is its '*easy to – perform – anywhere*' structure. As mentioned elsewhere any open space or ground can be the performing space. Otherwise, in these days, everything, which can be performed on stage, can also be performed in Shumang lila.

The themes of the Shumang lilas are the reflection of the happenings inside Manipuri society and surrounding areas. Essentially based on daily happenings, family affairs, state administration, economic problems, complaints of disgruntled youths and various other social

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<sup>4</sup> Provided by Ngangom, Birjit in a personal interaction.

issues with elements of tragic-comic thrown in here and there, Shumang lila travels far and wide to report and tell tales of the people.

During the time of phagee lilas (farce), there were no written scripts. But the themes of the plays were social which made caricatures of the rulers and the subjects alike. They were the critical assessments of the prevailing conditions of the then Manipuri society. After phagee lilas, there came the turn for epic and religious plays. They were patronized by the kings. The religious plays like Gouralilas were encouraged by the rulers and their followers to preach the principles of Hinduism. Before World War II, all the plays were scriptless. They were handed down from mouth to mouth and gurus or directors were responsible for the productions.

Since script writing in Shumang lila was introduced, around 1950, it became difficult to produce a Shumang lila without a script. This, in a way, boosted the growth of the languishing literary scenario of Manipur. People were enthused to write and present their views in live performances. But script writing requires a firm control over the craft of theatre. The writer is required to arrange the contents in an orderly manner. He cannot patch in a comic scene anywhere, even if he wants to give a light touch to his play. He has to keep the social milieu of the audience in mind. An unwanted element will irk the audience and instead of serving them, it will bring distaste to the whole play. Script writing has a deep meaning behind it. The scriptwriter does not simply write a play. His writing is the reflection of his class background, his relation with the director and the troupe<sup>35</sup> and his assessment of the society. As a whole, his personality is projected in his plays. The craft of Shumang lila in general and scriptwriting in particular, are immensely influenced by the political, economic and social turmoils of Manipur. For instance, success or failure of democracy and socialism in Manipur, agitation for state assembly and statehood (1960s-1970s), the activities of Naga hostiles and demands for a separate status for the Manipuris are all enacted with resourceful feedback. Materials have been explored from all possible sources, which now cover romance, satirical sketches, heroic sacrifices, war scenes, historical and mythological episodes etc. As time changes, there are new additions of themes. Even plays, which are not at all related to the social values of the Manipuris, are produced. For instance, the recent production of '*World Trade Centre*', based on the September – 11/2001 terrorist attack on world trade centre, is welcome by the people with open arms. Shumang lila is acting now as 'infotainment'. This way, the world trade centre has been popularized and *Osama-Bin-Laden* has been immortalized in the minds of the audience.

Scriptwriters' imaginations are limitless but they have to choose appropriate themes to be performed. Sometimes, they have to be penalized for the bold approach, which includes critical

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<sup>35</sup> N. Premchand (article) – Shumang lilada script (The role of script in Shumang lila).

assessment of the government functioning. For instance, *Chana Lukhoi*, the leading scriptwriter, was arrested by Indian army for his play “*Eegi Nong*” (Rain of blood) which depicted the theme of insurgency in Manipur. Comedy (phagee) is an integral constitution of Shumang lila. As mentioned elsewhere, modern Shumang lila had its original in phagee lila (farce). But phagee lila was comedy from start to the end. Then, comedy was introduced as interlude in a Shumang lila. Today a comedian is regarded as an inevitable member of a troupe. Comic sequences interspersed in between other scenes are refreshing treats to the audience who cannot always relish the taste of romantic and serious scenes. This is because the audience comes to see the play to have a lighter moment away from day to day engagement and tensions. A play without a comedian is tasteless and lifeless and is not viable on commercial point of view. So, scriptwriter has to create, deliberately, the character of a comedian in his every play. Among new crops of socially approved comedians, *Dhanvir* and *Hemanta* (Ojha Tolhan) are the flag bearers. Hemanta feels<sup>36</sup> that the status of the comedians is high and even higher than government officials. It is because; they can even dictate upon them, mock at them and mobilize people to defy their corrupt activities.

A script is a crude material from the mine (mind) of the writer. It requires further refining to extract the pure product. This refinement is done by the artistic talent of a director. One can see the whole process in the market situation of selling and buying<sup>37</sup>. The scriptwriter sells his script to the troupe. The troupe with the help of a director converts it into a play, meant for live performance and then it is sold to the audience. So, a scriptwriter has to choose themes which are saleable and whose exchange values are high. Otherwise, his days are numbered. A scriptwriter does not have to be an armchair scholar but has to be always in touch with the social reality and happenings around the world. He is required to be artistic enough to combine his art with the market situation.

### **NUANCES OF ACTING AND ACTORS**

Everyone is an actor in social interaction, though someone is more articulate and dramatic than others are. There is always a projection of an image, which may not be his true image. As Goffman says, everyone is engaged in impression management. One may not be able to figure out whether the other person is in front stage or in back stage (fake or genuine). But in

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<sup>36</sup> Provided by S. Hemanta Singh in a personal interaction.

<sup>37</sup> N. Premchand (article).op. cit.

case of the theatrical performances, the audience knows that the actors are only framing a plot with realistic approach. It is a make – believe world where the artistes are engaged in impression management towards the audience. But, sometimes, the performances are such that the audience forgets the duplicity of the situation and venture into the surreal world where they laugh, cry, make faces, hate the character, boo etc. This shows how acting could be so effective in transforming a spectator, at least for the time being.

Acting in Shumang lila is a difficult assignment, more difficult than that in the proscenium theatre. It is real live performance. The Shumang lila actors have to depend on themselves, on their confidence once they are in the performing space in the midst of the looming audience. There is no prompting, unlike in stage theatre, to save them from the discontinuity in dialogue delivery. They have to use their presence of mind to ball themselves out of the embarrassing moments. This demands a lot of confidence and perseverance on the part of the actors. Otherwise, they will not be allowed to stand in the performing arena by the smart audience.

Acting in Shumang lila, and for that matter in any theatre, needs a lot of hard work and practice. Body language, voice modulation, acrobatic skills are all the essential ingredients of it. In earlier days, say in 1<sup>st</sup> half of 20<sup>th</sup> century, Shumang lila and its other variants were performed mostly by the older people but with the advent of scriptwriting and other advanced forms of entertainment like T. V., cinema, etc., Shumang lila had to have a serious thought about its own existence. So, professionalism came about with the joining of youths in Shumang lila. This also gives an opportunity to them to open up a new avenue of employment apart from meeting their artistic urges. Most of the present day, actors are full time professionals who earn their living from Shumang lila performances alone. A troupe, at present value, charges around 7500 Rs as dakshina per show in and around Imphal city and 8000 Rs for the places located more than 25 kms away from Imphal city.

In addition to the money, the actors have outstanding skills and reputation. They are recognized easily wherever they go and people want to talk to them and associate with them. Some of them have star status and even throw star tantrums. Seeing such success in Shumang lila, many stage theatre personalities have joined Shumang lila. Initially they face problems in adapting, as the two different media of performances. As a recent development Shumang lila actors traverse to the realm of film to seek recognition as artistes of multiple talents. These actors are from any part of Manipur, from rural areas outside Imphal and also from Imphal city. Talents are born anywhere and they need to be moulded and polished into finer shapes. This is done by the hands of able directors.

## 'MALE ACTRESSES' – THE TORCH-BEARERS OF SHUMANG LILA

Male transvestites (Male actresses) are the main attraction of a Shumang lila presentation. If the female roles were enacted by female artistes, there would not be a higher craze to see Shumang lilas. Male actresses are the invention of time. During the days of Harishchandra and Mairaba Charan (early 20<sup>th</sup> century), female roles were done by women only. But in Shumang lilas that came after them, they had been replaced by male actors. There could be two reasons for these changes: --

1. *Social constraint* :-- Unavailability of women traveling to far off places in the night-time to perform. It was not practicable, more so, in a traditional society like that of Manipur at that particular point of history.
2. *Technical Constraint* :-- Shumang lila needs to be as realistic as possible. There arises the need of closing up of bodies of the male and female artistes when the script demands. This was something, which was not expected from male and female artistes during that time, that too before everyone's eyes. So, the services of male actresses were called for to save Shumang lila from oblivion.

There can be questions in the inquisitive mind of a reader. Why women are not allowed to act in Shumang lila in the land of priestesses (Maibis) where the market is controlled by women folk? This can be explained keeping in view of the secular and religious spheres in mind. Priestesses (Maibis) are socially sanctioned to perform religious duties and are regarded part and parcel of ritual ceremonies. At the same time, women are allowed to perform in religious performing arts such as Rasa lilas, Gouralila, Gosthlila etc. The particular period in the history of Manipur also played a vital role. In olden days, whatever activities the kings patronized were regarded as socially useful. So, kings encouraged women to take part in religious activities in order to strengthen the hold of Vaisnavism on Manipur society. But, the scene in secular performing arts such as Shumang lila was not as encouraging as in above cases as far as women artistes were concerned. During those days women acting in drama and Shumang lilas were looked down upon as of loose character who mingled freely with men folk. So, a woman of good family was not expected to join such art form. As a matter of fact, no family considers itself as a bad family. Thus, women had to languish without being able to exploit their theatrical creativity. This social constraint led to the establishment of convention that male actors should take the role

of female. The Manipuri audience has also happily welcomed this peculiar arrangement in this exotic dish called Shumang lila.

The male actresses are so feminine in their looks, voices and gestures that they are mistaken as real women. Even with little make-up, they look fabulous. In the pre-war era, for make up they used only *chandan* (sacred tilaka earth), *tiki* (small cakes made of charcoal dust used in kindle tobacco in the bowl of a hooka), simple powder, sindoor etc. But in modern day Shumang lila, all the advanced materials are being used. These augment their feminine looks, which captivate both men and women alike. Make-up and dressing up as female are all done by themselves without the help of any professional beauticians. In looks, at present day, R.K.Sanaton and Oinam Arun are the forerunners. Even women look up to them as their models and envy their beauties.

According to *A.K. Bengol*, a leading actor of 'Dedicated World Artistes Union', there can be two categories of male actresses. One who are there for the love of art of transvestism. Another who live their daily lives as transvestites. Acting as male actresses is an exacting job. It needs a lot of devotion, much more than the male actors. There has to be coherent combination of feminine acting and female voice. They have to be extra careful not to forget one while concentrating on the other. Since Bollywood captured the hearts of the Manipuris, Hindi film dances and songs have become very common amongst them. So, this can also be reflected in Shumang lila. Male actresses draw inspirations from Hindi film heroines. They dance like Madhuri Dixit and show the oomph of Urmila. But one must be careful to snare his fancy because they are all male Madhuris and Male Urmilas. Those who cannot have control over their emotions, go to the extent of expressing their admiration of the male actresses by, even, proposing them. Arun, who is one of the most popular male actresses of today, is happy that he has been wholeheartedly accepted by the audience and that he is doing complete justice to his job.

Now, it would be too late to reintroduce women into Nupa Shumang lila, though the Manipuri society has reached a certain stage where substantial amount of liberty is given to the women. It simply will not get along with the audience<sup>38</sup>. The audience has been used to the male actresses and they have been etched in the psyche of the former. So, traditionalism must also be maintained to retain the essence of Shumang lila. Shumang lila minus male actresses and multidimensional performing space is just any other play on the stage. Preserving of these two ingredients will save it from vanishing into the big jaw of modern theatre.

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<sup>38</sup> Provided by G. Tombi Sharma, a theatre personality, in a personal interaction.



## AUDIENCE – THE MICROCOSM OF THE MANIPURI SOCIETY

Shumang lila performances up to early 1970s were usually done in the night. But due to the increase in the love for this by the audience, it is common to see Shumang lila performances even in day-time, now. The composition of the audience is egalitarian in character. All the categories of social stratification except gender are dismantled among the audience. It is a free entertainment program enjoyed by all-children, women, literates, illiterates, scholars, government servants, Muslims, tribals etc. The only demarcation it has is the separation of the audience into two sections – one for male and other for female. As per the convention, early comers have to take the front places irrespective of their social status and latecomers the back places<sup>39</sup>. All are seated mostly on the straws laid on the ground or carpets depending on how well a Shumang lila is organized. This audience composition is reflective of the social structure of the Manipuri society, which is fairly egalitarian.

Shumang lila is a theatre for the mass and the modern theatre for the class. Any person in any form of clothing can come and enjoy it. Women, children and menfolk just venture out to the performing place without any special preparation. Mothers come with their babies on their backs and enjoy the play and at the same time breastfeed them in hassle free manner. The spectacle of the audience itself is a drama in itself. There is a hilarious laughter from one corner, one sudden cry by a baby, one shouting to start the play from another corner etc. The atmosphere is like that of a carnival. On the other hand, the audience of modern theatre is a selected one comprising of people belonging to certain class, mainly middle class. It has got some unwritten norms for dress, dictions, behaviour etc. Once one is inside the hall, he is expected to talk in low voice not to disturb others, has to be polite in behaviour using decent language, applause should be within a limit etc.

An audience of a Shumang lila can be divided into five categories-

1). *Deaf*, 2). *Blind*, 3). *Children*, 4). *Ordinary people* and 5). *Critical minded people*. This means, it can be enjoyed by anybody. Deaf can enjoy the story through symbolic communication, blinds through the window of ears. Children laugh when people laugh, jump up when frightened by the sound of a bullet, embrace their mothers when the villain yells. All this is sheer emotional reaction. The fourth category enjoys the dramatic effects, song and dance sequences and does not give much thought to the pros and cons of the theme shown in the play. These people come, see and go back thoroughly enjoyed. The 5<sup>th</sup> category is one who critically studies the aesthetic nature of the play, the theme, the music etc. they are the ones who see the play holistically and study the

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<sup>39</sup> Singh, M. Kirti op. cit. P-208

practicability of the production in the wider society. A good Shumang lila must cater to the demands of all these categories of the audience.

A Shumang lila is a community gathering. People from the same village or same *Leikai* (locality) are gathered at the spot joined by people from adjoining villages or Leikais. The 'dramas' within the audience are a source of collective consciousness. The dramas range from silent exchange of glances and eatables between lovers to the exchange of fists of fury. The gathering is, one way, functional as it gives the members, a time to sit together, gossip, exchange their views on day-to-day affairs etc. This gives them a sense of belongingness to the same community. It serves a latent function to bind them together. Moreover, it serves as a respite to the people after day's busy and tiresome works in fields or offices. It also serves as a safety valve to the upwardly mobile Manipuri society. On the other hand, it may be a heaven for troublemakers too. As it is time for moneymaking, liquor is the most handy 'syrup' to boost one's adrenalin. The exchange of blows and messing up of the whole atmosphere are not uncommon scenes in such gatherings. Functions and dysfunctions are parts of this game too.

### **SWAY OF SHUMANG LILA OVER THE MANIPURI SOCIETY**

The 1<sup>st</sup> question which a thinking mind would like to ask is – why did the need of Shumang lila arise in Manipur when it had got various traditional forms of arts? Manipur, as mentioned elsewhere, is the cradle of various forms of traditional dance, dance drama, music, games and sports, both nonvaisnavite and Vaisnavite. All of these hold their own places in serving the cultural and religious needs of the people. But most of them are ritualistic and efficacious in nature. They do not give a wholesome entertainment to the people. People felt the need for a medium of entertainment, which was secular, and of less rules and regulations. Moreover, the dance dramas like Rasa lilas, laiharaoba, Gouralila etc. are seasonal. Compelled by all the above reasons, Phagee lila was born to serve the people of Manipur anytime and anywhere. Shumang lila, the offshoot of Phagee lila gained popularity as a community theatre unlike the Jatra of Assam which is languishing now-a-days. The reason for the popularity can be threefold.<sup>40</sup>

1). Its unique proximity to the audience, irrespective of old and young, important and common man,

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<sup>40</sup> Ningomba, Narendra, (article) – No Stops for Shumang lila, 7<sup>th</sup> March, 1995, The Eastern Herald Tribune.

- 2). Its various elements of entertainment that go along with the changing time and
- 3). Its easy-to-perform-anywhere nature.

The organization of a Shumang lila performance needs less management. The process has a rustic charm. A. K. Bengol, rightly, draws a simile between Shumang lila troupe and *shanddoctor* (veterinary doctor). Like the latter who is directed towards the *shangol* (cow shed), which is stinking with cow dung, the moment he comes to treat the ailing cow, a Shumang lila troupe is also directed towards the crudely built green room with not many materials of comfort. On the other hand, the stage theatre group is regarded as a simile of *Mee-doctor* (human doctor). Like human doctor who is treated well with tea and snacks and is led to a room of a house for the treatment of the sick, the stage theatre group is given the comfort of a well-furnished and well-equipped green room. The reasons for this loose treatment towards the Shumang lila troupes are because of-----

1. The convention which has been in Vogue for decades,
2. The people's identification with the Shumang lila artistes.

In Manipur, stage theatre personalities are assumed to be more methodical, more respectable, better actors etc. as compared to Shumang lila artistes. But the reality is different. The Shumang lila artistes are more popular; earn more, as fine in acting as stage theatre artistes, as professional as the latter.

Shumang lila serves five functions:--

1. *Amusement,*
2. *Validating culture,*
3. *Education,*
4. *Maintaining conformity to the accepted patterns of behaviours and*
5. *Instrument of social, cultural and political changes.*

Before assuming that Shumang lila gives only positive effects on audience, it is pertinent to ponder upon its dysfunctional side also. There can be one question – does not it do harm to the impressive mind of the audience ? Most of the Shumang lila depict the age old belief that the good triumphs over the evil. In this process of establishing the triumph of good, there are depictions of events which are contemptuous and abhorred. But the audience is also vulnerable and may be tempted to experiment those evil deeds. There is a saying that lie told hundred times becomes truth. Script writers must be cautious in selecting themes and dialogues in keeping with the Manipuri society and also the literature of the land.

The craft of Shumang lila is very much impressed by the Manipuri society. But the play must not serve as a preacher to the audience. The indifferent audience will not even hear what the play wants to convey no matter how hard the play tries to deliver the goods. There are sections of audience who come just to enjoy and forget when they leave the place. The most a Shumang lila can do is to act as a catalyst which may arouse the enthusiasm among the audience to look into the society and themselves<sup>41</sup>.

The impact of a performance on the audience can be of two ways:--

1. *Allopathic*:-- it is the immediate arousal of emotions of the audience. It drives them to laugh uncontrollably or cry or boo etc. There are innumerable examples of sudden burst of emotions. Narendra Ningomba narrates some of his direct experiences. The play '*Lanpunggee pungkhol*' (sound of battle drum) is a depiction of insurgency problem in Manipur. The main protagonist (played by himself), who is an insurgent in the play, is shot dead in the climax by the army. The depiction was so perfect and so moving that suddenly a woman ran towards the body of the actor and shook him vigorously and saying, 'get up my son, donot sleep.....' The whole atmosphere became so charged with gloom that the actor himself was dumbfounded. Later on, it was found out that the story of the play was very similar to that of her son's who was also shot dead by the army. Then, the troupe was invited to her family and they interacted with and consoled the family. This is a living example of how much this form of performing art can influence the audience.
2. *Homoeopathic*:-- This form of impact is gradual. This drives the audience to think over the event and self introspect. This may, in a way, encourage them to go for social change – both social development and abolition of social evils.

Shumang lila, now, reflects the deviation from "art for the sake of art" to 'art for the sake of soceity'.

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<sup>41</sup> Tongbra, G. C. (article) – Jatibu Nouhoua Sherngatpada Shumang lilagi Thoudang (the role of Shumang lila in nourishing a nation), 1976, Seminar on Shumang lila, organized by Manipur State Kala Academy, Imphal.

## WINDS OF CHANGE

The Manipuri society is in the crossroad of tradition and modernity. This is also reflected in the Shumang lila performances. There is breaking down of conventions followed by traditional play productions. Both form and content of this folk theatre have started tilting towards the modernity. The modern artistes are apt to use improper dress, ornaments and make-up without any dignity<sup>42</sup>. According to the Meitei dress codes, an unmarried maiden has to wear her *Phanek* (lower garment or sarong) round the loin. A married woman ties her *Phanek* round the body under the armpits and over the breasts, thus, covering her body from calf to the breasts. The ultra modern male actresses in informal roles do not observe this decorum. Again, a trend is seen in which a king in a lila is shown to wear Ajmeri turban, a practice which is not approved by the community. As if this is not enough, a Meitei woman is shown to wear Vermillion mark on her forehead and wear Sari, which are complete alien to the Manipuri culture.

The question, here, is not contempt towards the modernity and salute to the tradition. It is the question of fitting in of appropriate parts at appropriate place so that the whole product looks decent. If individualism, fragmented family, violence etc. mean modernity then the Manipuri society is not yet ready for this. So, Shumang lila ought not to indulge in the portrayal of non-sensical and impracticable events. It will serve neither as a bearer of social message nor as a medium of entertainment. The Shumang lila artistes need always to remember that they have a responsibility on their shoulders to educate and entertain people in right manner. The question of tradition and modernity goes along with that of globalisation and commercialization. Due to the advancement in field of transportation and communication, it is not a great deal to know anything about anywhere in the world. One can be exposed to any information at the click of a button of T. V. or a mouse. Apart from this virtual reality, one can have access to any exotic goods and consume them. Manipur, though physically isolated, is not lagging behind in this rat race. Many alien cultural traits have landed on this valley through various media. This is reflected in Shumang lila also. The modern elements like production design, western clothes, sophisticated musical instruments etc. have already captured a comfortable place in it. With this, its horizon has been broadened, stretching even outside Manipur. There have been efforts to show them to audiences in other parts of India and even abroad. Special plays for these audiences are composed and produced. For instance, Sanaleipak Nachom Artistes was a part of annual drama festival of National School of Drama, New Delhi. This same troupe also toured metropolis in Kerala, Kolkata and Mumbai. There are many interesting stories connected to these tours. In Mumbai,

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<sup>42</sup> Singh, M. Kirti op.cit, p-210

after the performance of '*Memsahabki Sari*' (Sari of Memsahab), a rich local lady approached Sanaton<sup>43</sup> (the leading male actress) and asked his hand for her son. She was so mesmerizing that the lady could not believe the 'beautiful girl' in Sari was really a young man. So, such performances took the foreign audiences by storm though they could not grasp the language.

With the journey of constant addition and elimination, commercialization also began to dawn Shumang lila production. Various innovative elements have been introduced for a play's commercial success. Advertising also has become one of its marketing tactics on the line of film and modern stage theatre. Troupes have to be extra careful in choosing the scripts, music, actors, directors etc. as the competition is very tough amongst them. Any colourful production with song and dance numbers, more fight sequences will not promise a success since the audience is not fool. Thus, this uneasy transformation from tradition to modernity is underway in Shumang lila today.

### **THREAT TO SHUMANG LILA AND ITS ARTISTES**

There is a fear that this folk theatre may lose its traditional charm completely one day. The reasons for this fear may be as follows:--

1. Shortage of open space in city areas which compel the Shumang lila to climb the forbidden unidirectional stage. When the performing space changes, its charm also, hugely, reduces.
2. The drive by people to reduce the amount of entertainment and to increase the fight for economic prosperity.
3. Production of film version of popular Shumang lilas. This reduces the frequency of the performance of those plays as they have already been shown as films.
4. No pensions to the retired artistes as social security, which makes the artistes to rethink before joining this art form.

Despite all these threats to the very existence of Shumang lila, the troupes are struggling hard to update their performances by any possible way. If it is to survive with all its wings flapping energetically in the firmament of performing arts, it has to create a Sangam (confluence) of tradition and modernity.

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<sup>43</sup> As told by R. K. Sanaton Singh in a personal interaction.



Plate I

Photo: Courtesy, Sanaleipak Nachom



1. 'WAITING TO STRIKE' – An Americanized Osama-Bin-Laden, Planning out strategy to strike at 'Twin Towers' with his henchmen in a scene from the play 'World Trade Centre', performed at Bhagyachandra Open Air theatre, Imphal on the 19<sup>th</sup> January, 2002

Photo: Courtesy, Oinam Arun



2. 'MEN CAST IN THE MOULD OF WOMEN' – Nupi Shabis (male actresses), Oinam Arun (left) and R.K. Sanaton Singh (right) with a fellow male actress.





3. 'WOW!'— R.K. Sanaton Singh in a wedding gown in the play, 'World Trade Centre'.



4. 'AN ISLAND IN THE MIDST OF A SEA OF AUDIENCE' – A slightly modified performing area with a raised stage (a new modification) surrounded by the spectators from all sides.

**Note:** All the photographs (3-12) are taken by me.





5. 'O, GOD .....'- A prayer before the commencement of a play.



6. 'HUM, TUM .....'- A song and dance sequence in the play 'World Trade Centre'.  
(The passage which serves as both entrance and exit is visible).



7. 'GUN AND GOSH' – A gun wielding Osama-Bin-Laden (L. Tomba) in the play 'World Trade Centre'.



8. 'SAFE WITH YOU BUDDY' – Osama-Bin-Laden with one of his most devoted guards (Nilachandra).





9. 'CHALO.....CHALE....' – An emotional scene from 'World Trade Centre'.



10. 'DO, RE, MI, PHA.....' – The orchestra giving the most appropriate music enthralling the audience.



11. 'RANGEELA RE.....' – Oinam Arun in a scintillating song and dance sequence.



12. 'YOU HAVE SEEN ME?.....' – Male actresses decorating themselves in the 'back-stage' before they present themselves in the 'front-stage'.

# **EPILOGUE**

Theatre is one of the most pervasive performative art forms, which is present, both in crude form among Primitive Australian Aborigines and also in its most polished and advanced form in Broadway (New York). The theatre is shaped and developed by the social environment. How different forms of traditional theatre exist around the world has been witnessed in Chapter-2. How the theatre is shaped by the social environment can be seen from theatres of Mexico and Germany, the countries which are nearly at two extremes of the industrial development scale.<sup>1</sup> Mexico is predominantly a country of villages with agrarian economy. The theatre is a village affair, a communal enterprise known as *fiesta*, in which the entire population usually participates either as performers or spectators. The dramas are simple and naïve: enactment of incidents in the lives of the saints or of Christ. On the diametrically extreme point, Germany is a highly industrialized country with population cramped for living space, crowded for the most part into numerous large cities and mainly dependent for its livelihood upon industry and commerce. The emphasis on education and the importance placed upon the acquisition of knowledge, often for its own sake, resulted in widespread presentation of the classics of dramatic literature: Greek and Elizabethan plays and as well as other modern plays. The German theatre reflects the modern passion for technology.

We have seen in the first chapter (prologue) that theatre is not only confined to its literal world but also encompasses the metaphorical world. In this connection we have dealt with social drama and the characters individuals play in face-to-face interaction. This metaphor can still be extended further at the '*war front*' where we can see the enactment of real life drama. History of world is full of armed conflicts. Two enemies (groups or individuals) fighting against each other for a certain end embodies sufficient amount of drama. Commander ordering his army to charge the enemy front, the soldiers shouting war cry, charging with full courage armed with bows and arrows, axes and swords, rifles and hand-grenades etc., striking, chopping and shooting their enemy in close body contact fight, abusing the enemy, killing the enemy and being killed in the

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<sup>1</sup> Rice, Elmer – *The living theatre*, 1960, William Heinemann Ltd. P-29

process, all are the climactic point of an action packed real life drama. Such extreme scene of drama could be witnessed more when the technology was not highly advanced. Due to advent of fighter jets, missiles and nuclear bombs, the face-to-face encounter in battlefields is highly reduced. These technologies may increase the amount of destruction both human and material, they seem not to be too profitable for theatre.<sup>2</sup> Again with the upsurge of electronic media, war is reported like a Videogame. There is a blurring of line between reality and virtual reality.

Coming back to the literal world of theatre from the metaphorical world, one may ask some inevitable questions. Can theatre be possible during strife or war? Can entertainment be an ethically right approach in a strife torn area? The answer could be both affirmative and negative. Entertainment can serve as a tension reliever tonic even in a strife torn area. There had been reports of pop singers, including Geri Helliwel (of spice girls), performing for British and U. S. A. armies stationed in gulf region. This is an example of lessening the anxiety of living in a warfront. On the other hand, theatre and entertainment may not be conducive in certain strife torn areas. This has been seen in case of Shumang lila in Manipur during the 2<sup>nd</sup> World war. The people of Manipur were too busy protecting their lives to be engaged in theatre.

Theatre is a social phenomenon in the sense that it requires a congregation of people for its performance. If audience is not ready to come and witness the play then there can be no theatre, as discussed in the prologue of this work. Theatre is a social phenomenon also because of the coordination existing amongst numerous persons involved in the production of a performance. There is a division of labour amongst the dramatist, the producer, the director, the actors, stage designers, light operator, sound operator etc. Only when they cooperate to each other, a successful performance can be belted out. This back-stage division of labour can be used equally on the front-stage performance also. A play is enjoyable when there is appropriate enactment of roles from each actor. If there is no coordination amongst them the play will be a failure no matter how excellent the actors are. The play will look merely as disjointed anecdotes. This is true also of Shumang lila. Here we can bring in the concept of Division of labour of

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<sup>2</sup> Erika Munk – *Before the fall: Yugoslav Theatre of opposition. In 'Theatre', Vol. 31, No. 1, Theatre and War, A special issue, p-11*



Durkheim. According to him, Division of labour is the specialization of one's function – “*Make yourself usefully fulfill a determinate function*”.<sup>3</sup> For him it is one of the fundamental bases of the social order. It is present not only in economic world but also in political, administrative, judicial, aesthetic and scientific world.

The most remarkable effect of the division of labour is not that it increases the output of functions divided, but it renders them solidary.<sup>4</sup> Function of an individual is required by others and he also requires others' service. This dependence on each other renders solidarity among them. Such is also in the case of theatrical production.

Specialisations of functions become more elaborate when a society becomes more advanced. So, specialization becomes more intricate with modernization, both technological and cultural. Modernity, according to Dipankar Gupta<sup>5</sup>, has more to do with attitudes than the possession of modern technology. A modern society must have certain characteristics such as Dignity of the individual; Adherence to universalistic norms; Elevation of individual achievement over privileges or disprivileges of birth; and Accountability on public life. In the globalised world of today such concept of modernity can be pervasive. Modernisation and globalisation come with a tag of commercialisation and consumerism.

Commercialisation is increasingly present in theatre also. A theatrical production is judged from the angle of its commercial success. The producers and managers are preponderantly motivated by the hope of monetary profit. A meritorious play that cannot, for economic reasons, be kept running long enough to find its audience, is shown its way out. Theatre, today, is not just an art but has become a business enterprise. It may be a demand of the time when acting, directing, playwriting have become specialized professions. This is also happening in Shumang lila in Manipur also. In order to sell a play better, every little detail is taken care of and every effort to market a play is heeded. There is interlacing of tradition and modernity in Shumang lila. While retaining its traditional form of presentation, it has experimented with new ideas and commercial aspect is also carefully considered. There is a rapid effort of broadening its horizon by

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<sup>3</sup> Durkheim, Emile – *The division of labor in Society* (translated by George Simpson). 1933, The Free Press, New York. P-43.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. pp. 80-60

<sup>5</sup> Gupta, Dipankar – *Mistaken Modernity – India Between Worlds 2000*. Harper Collins Publishers India p-2



crossing the boundary of Manipur and serving audience of other parts of the world. It is a vigorous endeavour of commercialization in this globalised world. This effort is a survival tactic in the face of this competitive era.

Commercialisation does not, however, mean that a play can include whatever is economically viable. There is also a moral side of a performance also. It must cater to the norms and traditions of a society. Otherwise theatre has also a cutting whip called censorship. This comes mostly from governmental agency and also from non-official pressure groups.<sup>6</sup> A balanced censorship serves a positive function to maintain the morality and decency of the society and to serve the taste of the audience. But excessive censorship is a curse for the development of theatre. This was witnessed during Hitler in Germany when he banished all “non-Aryans” and opponents of Nazism. But such censorship from a regime is not a durable one. Once it is gone and is replaced by other, the norms of censorship also change. They keep on changing as the regime changes. The most reliable censor board is ‘audience’. If it is not in agreement with a production, there is no way a producer can carry on his play and earn money. This comes to the essence of theatre i.e., participation of the audience. In the case of Shumang lila, people of Manipur are the most accomplished judge. If they are not entertained, then the days of a play are numbered, no matter how hard the troupe works to make it commercially viable. The audience of Manipur has been following Shumang lila from its genesis as ‘Phagee lila’ (farce) to ‘Eshei lila’ (Modern Shumang lila) without much grudge. This means people of Manipur are not censoring such metamorphosis and are in love with this art form. But Shumang lila must also know its limitations and must not cross the boundary beyond which there can be wrath of the people. Shumang Lila, thus, is a means to an end and not an end in itself. As long as this is remembered time and again it can keep on entertaining and educating the receptive and curious people of this state called Manipur.

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<sup>6</sup> Rice, Elmer. Op. cit. pp. 276-277

## APPENDIX

Names of 26 Shumang lila troupes which participated in all Manipur Shumang lila festival 2002.

A). **NUPI LILA TROUPES (FEMALE TROUPES)**

1. MEIDINGU KHAGEMBA NUPI SHUMANG LILA MARUP
2. SHIVA YATRA CUM DRAMA ASSOCIATION
3. WOMEN FOR CULTURAL CENTRE
4. NEW DRAMATIC UNION
5. KANGJABI MEITEI CHANU ARTISTE CUM DRAMA ASSOCIATION
6. CHANURA YATRA CUM DRAMA ASSOCIATION
7. YANGAM LEIRAK NUPI ASSOCIATION
8. URIPOK SORBON THINGEL WOMEN YATRA CUM DRAMA ASSOCIATION
9. EASTERN YATRA MANDAL
10. TUBILEIMA NUPI SHUMANG LILA MARUP
11. SAGOLBAND MOIRANG LEIRAK MEITEI LEIMA YATRA CUM DRAMA ASSOCIATION
12. MALOM TULIHAL AWANG LEIKAI NUPI CHAOKHAT THOURANG LUP

B). **NUPA LILA TROUPES (MALE TROUPES)**

1. SANA LEIPAK NACHOM ARTISTES
2. NAHAROL KHONGTHANG ARTISTE ASSOCIATION
3. MANIPUR CO-ARTISTE ASSOCIATION
4. DEDICATED WORLD ARTISTE UNION
5. PAKHANGBA ARTISTE UNION
6. MEITEI LEIMA YATRA CUM DRAMA ASSOCIATION
7. NORTH IMPHAL MANIPUR YATRA MANDAL
8. KAMAKHYA SANGEET MANDAL
9. WORLD ARTISTE ASSOCIATION
10. IMPHAL YATRA CUM DRAMA ASSOCIATION
11. JUPITER ARTISTE UNION
12. BIR TIKENDRA JIT ARTISTE UNION
13. TIMES STAR ARTISTE UNION

Courtesy: - Office of the Manipur State Shumang lila Council, Imphal

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