



Manipuri Cinema And Its Institutional Discourse

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ABSTRACT

Cinema which is a form of popular culture can also be examined as a social institution. After all “Film as part of culture reflects the values, dreams and hopes of societies. It specifically, is a powerful medium that conveys the values and beliefs of contemporary societies” (Cloete, 2017). Thus, cinema has a close interaction, influence and impact to any given society today in multiple dimensions and vice versa. However, as an institution and cultural form, it is very new and has a recent origin. But, within its short life span, cinema succeeds in making a tremendous change and evolution in its forms, modes, contents, context, technology and reachability. So, considering the intimate relation that cinema has with the masses, and also its fast changing forms and dimensions, this paper examine Manipuri Cinema and its discourse as an institution through the volatile socio-cultural, economic and political conditions of the state across the time period since its conception. Manipuri cinema has a distinctive world of its own; and is also occupying an important position, as a regional cinema, in drawing the overall landscape of Indian cinema. So, to examine and illustrate the various factors that leads to the birth of Manipuri cinema and its changing forms, from celluloid to digital through video films, is the main impetus of this paper.

Introduction

Matamgi Manipur, the First Manipuri Feature Film was released on 9th April, 1972 and thus the Manipur State Film Development Society (MSFDS) observes a yearlong (9th April 2021 – 9th April, 2022) Golden Jubilee celebration, marking the journey of Manipuri cinema appropriately with the tagline: ‘Stories we Breathe’. Indeed, cinema, as one of the most recent form of mass media, has a close affinity with the life of general public. It grows, expands, evolves and survives only by the appropriation of the masses. After all, “cinema is a stylized representation of reality” (Schickel, 2015) manifesting the logic, emotions, values, aspirations, inspirations, expectations etc of human through audio-visual medium. It mirrors the masses while also simultaneously constructing our everyday reality. The metaphoric elements in cinema acts as a vehicle for self-reflection enabling the consumers to think, to, interpret, to discuss, to differ and to agree and to contextualized personally at different forms and at multiple levels. “Film as part of culture reflects the values, dreams and hopes of societies. It specifically, is a powerful medium that conveys the values and beliefs of contemporary societies” (Cloete, 2017). Film takes viewer on a journey where narrative acts as the ‘engine’ that drives viewers all along. Cinema makes viewer’s imagination to participate and go along with the narration and thus drawing people temporarily into an alternative world. So, it also serves as an important medium to collect information and interpreted (Kracauer, 1965). According to Makhonmani Mongsaba (2022), cinema is a composite art form that combines different form of expressions - poetry, music, dance, drama etc, into an integrated whole through the energetic use of audio-visual symbols and imaginations. After all, “art and life are two sides of the same coin; art cannot be divorced from life” (Sardar, 2018). So, cinema has a close interaction, influence and impact to any given society. However, as an institution and cultural form, cinema succeeds in making a tremendous change and evolution in its forms, modes, contents, context, and technology.

Considering the intimate relation that cinema has with the masses, and also its fast changing forms and dimensions, this paper particularly examines Manipuri Cinema and its discourse as an institution through the volatile socio-cultural, economic and political conditions of the state across the time period since its

conception. Manipur, a small peripheral and multi-ethnic north-eastern Indian state also has its own share of socio-political history, economic conditions, socio-cultural movements and transformations. So, as a new institution, it is very important to study the multiple blows which cinema received and also the shapes it attained within the changing environment of the state. Besides, considering influx of large scale and high budget movies from outside, from outside the state as well as nation, the survival, transformation and existence of Manipuri cinema is also required to examine systematically, considering the fast changing technological factors and demand of the society.

Cinema in Manipur

Manipur, the erstwhile independent kingdom, was annexed and comes under British colonial power in the year 1981. However, the world of images in form of photographs was accessed by the members of the elite section of the society prior its annexation since the kingdom had political connections and established relationship with British authorities, neighboring as well as other kingdoms. Even the image projection upon screen through Magic Lantern was reported to have organized by the then Political Agent of Manipur, Frank St. Clair Grimwood, for the members of the royal families and elites in December, 1890 (Grimwood, 2023). Further, the general masses started witnessing and consuming silent Indian movies in the 1920s through touring cinema where temporary arrangements were made at localities to screen films through which organizers collected token money from viewers (Ningomba, 2007). Touring cinema entered the erstwhile kingdom and had widespread screening with the permission of the Manipur State Durbar. Talkie shows circulated by Messrs B. Kawaji & Co, Calcutta through Manipur State Durbar, for three months (1st January – 31st March, 1934) could have been the first talkie films shown in Manipur (Kongbam, 2020). Acknowledging the popularity of cinema among the masses, rudimentary and temporary film show houses were established in Manipur before the World War II. Kasturichand Jain and Ramkumar were pioneer film exhibitors who ran show houses in Manipur in the pre war period. Kasturi's show house Manipur Talkies (at Paona Bazar) established in 1936 and Ramkumar show house (at Thangal Bazar) in Imphal had regular film shows (Ningomba, 2007 & Kongbam, 2020).

The advent of technology for capturing moving images made individuals to capture films on Manipur, especially upon the essence of life and culture of the inhabitants. In 1935, Gerald Pakenham Stewart, President, Manipur State Durbar captured films on Women's Market, Old Palace, Royal Rathayatra, Receptions ceremony of King, Manipuri Wrestling, Polo and different dance forms (Kongbam, 2020). In 1936, Maharaja Kumar Priyabrata, popularly known as MKPB (1912 – 2005), made non-fiction films on culture and traditions of different communities of Manipur, locations and important events through his 8 mm movie camera that he personally owned (Ningomba, 2007 & Kongbam, 2020). In 1939, Anthropologist Ursula Graham Bower also captured films on different Tribal community of the state and also in culture and crafts of Manipur (Kongbam, 2020). Thus, films were made upon Manipur to document different facet of its culture and life but not with the primary objective to consume by the general public for entertainment purposes.

In Manipur, the world of Cinema, Hollywood as well as Bollywood movies had its prevalence and popularity in pre Second World War period with Cinema being screened at public grounds, British official's residences and Military camps for public views (Bidur, 2011). Meanwhile, the growing popularity of cinema among the public has succeeded in establishing it as an entertainment business and the Manipur State Durbar fixed the taxable income at 1.66 percent in the rupee of the gross receipts per film show. Also, the Cinematograph Act 1918 (II of 1918) of the British Indian Legislature was introduced in the erstwhile kingdom of Manipur by 15th May, 1940 (Kongbam, 2020). Towards the end of the World War II, better organized cinema halls like MNB Talkies, Victory Cinema and Friends Talkies in Imphal started organizing regular shows for mass consumption.

Cinema of Manipur: the advent of Manipuri Cinema

Popular imagination and enthusiasm to narrates Manipuri culture, stories and emotions on screen leads to the making of first Manipuri feature film just after the Second World War, before the erstwhile kingdom being merged into the Indian Union. Nine Manipuri film enthusiast including of Ayekpam Birmangol, Sougajam Nabakumar, Sinam Krishnamohan established Shri Shri Govindajee Film Company in 1946 and through collaboration with Rathin Sen (a Bengali) started shooting *Mainu Pemcha* (by Kali studio Kolkata), a popular play by Rupmahal Theatre, by 1948. It could not get complete due to financial constraints and thus stopped after shooting eighteen reels (Ningomba, 2007 & Mongsaba, 2016). Selected pieces of nine reels were screened uncensored and un-edited in Victory cinema and Imphal Talkies in Imphal. Such an unsuccessful venture on its maiden attempt coupling with lack of technical experts, equipments and the small consumer market made impossible to visualize a Manipuri feature film among the enthusiast. Further, the barrier was elevated more with the merger of the kingdom to the Indian union in 1949 resulting changes in socio-political landscape and its demands. Thus, the tempo for making Manipuri film naturally died down with a fresh enthusiasm that was born towards the end of 1960s, where intellectuals and students in Manipur raised their arms to preserve their identity and started looking for answer (Kongbam, 2020). Kongbrailatpam Ibohal

Sharma strived hard to make filmmaking a reality in Manipur using his 16 mm Bolex camera accompanying with self made processing studio. He successfully have completed in making features like, Ningthem Macha Ahum (1960), Ichel (1961), Mongpham (1962), Cultural Heritage (1964), Imphal Diary – Part I and Part II (1965 – 68) beside others even though could not succeed to make talkie movies. So, to fill the lacuna he used tape recorders at the back of screen to provide dialogue and music during screenings. He did not make films for profit but rather had taken them to different localities for free shows. 1960s may be described as ‘Silent Era of Manipuri Cinema’ (Bidur, 2010). Such pioneer in association with other film enthusiasts, succeeded in establishing Film Society of Manipur (in 1966, later registered in 1969 under Society Registration Act, 1860) and started organizing screening of good films and discussions were conducted regularly (Kongbam, 2020). Later Imphal Cine Club was formed in 1979 to provide a mileage in the positive film movement in Manipur but making a film in Manipuri was still a dream longing with much anticipation. On the other hand, Bollywood movies had also flooded to all cinema halls and thus occupying the expectations of viewers with its stories, stars and songs. (ibid)

Constant interaction and association with the medium of cinema and also the strong urge to tell a tale in Manipuri through this medium ultimately create a fertile ground to conceive Manipuri Cinema in late 1960s. During this period, with the establishment of All India Radio (AIR), Imphal in 1965, pioneers and enthusiast were also started having hand on experiences in the technicalities of modern mass media. Further, the state was also equipped with trained vocalist in different style of singing, musician, story tellers and academicians besides other inputs required in creating a film. On the artistic skills and sensibilities, Manipur had a long history and experiences of theatre with regular productions by prominent theatrical groups like Manipur Dramatic Union, Rupmahal Theatre, Ariyan Theatre, Society Theatre, Paradise Theatre etc since early 1940s (Sharma, 2007). On the verity of theme as played by proscenium theatrical groups, Manipur had witness an array of subjects ranging from religious and mythological stories (Prabhas Milan, 1902) to historical and cultural revivalism play (Nar Singh, 1925) and socio-cultural plays with focus being given to the conflict of tradition and modernity (Poktabi, 1939) which where were very popular among the masses. The birth and rise of Manipuri cinema was much influence by Manipuri theatre as most of the actors and directors in the beginning of Manipuri cinema were the prominent theatre personalities (Sharma, 2016).

Birth of Manipuri Cinema & the era of Celluloid Films

9th April is observed every year as *Mamigi Numit*, the birth of Manipuri cinema, as the first Manipuri Feature film *Matamgi Manipur* was release in 1972 on that day simultaneously at three cinema houses - Usha Cinema & Friends Taklies at Imphal and also at Azad Cinema in Kakching. It immediately followed by the release of second Manipuri film ‘*Brojendragi Luhongba*’ in 26th January, 1973. The birth of Manipuri cinema was the collective effort fulfilling the distant dreams of numerous film enthusiast and scholars who longed to bring Manipuriness and Manipuri sensibilities in cinema that reflects Manipur society, way of life, culture, identity and ethos. When it comes to cinema, before the release of first Manipuri feature film, Manipurites were exposed extensively to Hindi and Hollywood films for decades and hence familiar and imprinted with those sensibilities (Sharma, 2007 & Wahengbam, 2018). So, it was not easy to choose a cinematic content and form to replace the existing one when the familiar alternative was still flooded in the market for public consumption. Thus, to fight with the odes, film makers had to create cinema by checking and maintaining familiar taste of the consumers while introducing the cultural ethos and elements as entrusted. Initially, so, Manipuri cinema thus required to win the trust of audience and thus had to compromised and met with creative challenges which Aribam Syam Sharma did in his first three Manipuri films (Sharma, 2007). Thus, “Matamgi Manipur did not blindly borrow the prevailing sensibility of the dominant cinematic trend but strived to carve a unique film style incorporating the local culture and ethos in the existing cinematic form” (Wahengbam, 2018). Regarding the hardship of film making venture in Manipuri S. N. Chand, the director and producer, stated in the releasing function of *Brojendragi Luhongba* that filmmaking as a business is not successful in Manipur but they have taken up considering the immense love for the arts form and also their eagerness to shown the rich cultural heritage of Manipur. (Kongbam, 2020). However, the growth of Manipuri cinema in terms of number of production was much limited as the cost of journey in producing a cinema was very high and the monetary return from a movie was comparatively very low for being a small market. The financial loss of ‘Imagi Ningthem’ (1981) suffered the producer immensely and it made him to decide not to make Manipuri film unless supported by Government agencies financially (Sharma, 2016). After all, with a strong creative and artistic sensibility and mastery in the world of cinema, Manipuri Cinema able to win its audience and also a distinctive position at the national and international level within a short period of time. Besides the feature films, Manipuri cinema also accomplish to hold a distinctive position and accolades in documentary and short film genera as well at many national and international platforms (Wahengbam, 2018). Manipuri cinema able to bagged a total of 39 National Film awards in the short span of five decades with ten Manipuri feature films and twenty-six non-feature films being selected under Indian Panorama of the International Film Festivals of India (Kongbam, 2020).

Manipuri cinema and VHS (Video Home System)

“I want to tell story, and through cinema I can tell the stories as I perceives and wants to. So, I choose this particular medium but with the affordable technology available to tell my story” informed Khwairakpam Ramachandra (2023), Director of the first Manipuri VHS film ‘*Nonglei*’. So, telling stories and narrating human emotion was the prime objective for the birth of VHS films in Manipur. With the same impression, Narendra Ningomba also stated that “It is the story, the impression that we consume as cinema. So, as VHS also able to create impression and narrate a story, it is also a cinema”. Shortly, after the screening of the first VHS film, *Nonglei*, people favored the technology due to its affordability to narrate their stories. It was further promoted by the prevailing economic and socio-cultural system in the state. “Television arrives in the state by around 1982 at the onset of Asian games as a household medium” (Heisnam, 1993) which creates a fertile ground for the birth, growth and development of VHS cinema in Manipur. Movie theatre where Celluloid films screened were concentrated mainly in the urban area and it has certain shortcomings as people have to travel for consuming cinema. But with the arrival of television and less costlier VCD players, people could consume cinema at the household level. It lead to mushrooming-up of video parlors that regularly screen films through VCDs, Manipuri, Hindi & English, at urban as well as rural area as television and VCD machines were not able own by every household. Further, with the portability of television sets and VCR system, people started screening films at *Sumang* (open frontal veranda associating a Meitei/Meetei house, in general), *Sangoi* (an open outhouse associating the main house among the Meitei/Meetei), public ground and others for public consumption in events related with private ceremonies like marriage, house inauguration ceremonies etc or with other celebrations and festivals. Thus, a new culture of consuming cinema in neighborhoods, not in theatre, comes in Manipur and become a popular affair (Ramachandra, 2023). As a result by May 1993, in a short approximate period of five years 104 video films were produced only in Manipuri language for mass consumption (Heisnam, 1993).

Manipuri Cinema and Digital films

With the arrival of digital technology and cameras, the medium of cinema being captured in the new format was started in Manipur; and the first digital feature film ‘*Lammei*’ by Kangla Films was theatrically released at Friends Talkies, Imphal on April, 2002. The released digital feature film got certification for theatrical screening through the regional office, Central Board of Film Certification, Guwahati (Ningomba, 2007) which ultimately change the landscape of Manipuri films, in terms of number of production and diversity of subjects. The popularity of ‘*Lammei*’ and its theatrical screening influenced many of the earlier film makers to choose the digital alternatives over the celluloid medium considering the vast differences in the cost for production. Further, it promotes young film enthusiast and aspirant film makers to pursue and fulfill their dreams of making a film and telling a story. Such a move further increased the number of cinema halls both at rural and urban Manipur. Thus, by 2008, numbers of films which got censor certificates was lined up at cinema halls in Imphal waiting for its release dates (ibid). During this era, ‘*Nobab*’, a Manipuri digital film was selected for screening in International Film Festival of India, Goa held in 2009 and also another three Manipuri digital films got nomination for screening in the year 2010 (Devi, 2011). By early 2000s, Manipuri films started to witness a drastic change in its consumption pattern, from public screening at cinema theater to household or individual level primarily due to two factors: firstly owning of television sets, VCD players, DTH and cable connections at households levels and secondly the advent of personal mobile phone (Ningomba, 2021). The arrival of digital video feature films in Manipur was also accompanied with its own drawback among which movie makers started experimenting and elaborating more with the commercial market then the aesthetic value of a cinema, according to Bobby Wahengbam, acclaimed Manipuri Film critics. Distancing itself from the cultural milieu of the state and its people, Manipuri digital films started giving more prominence in its content to romance, fashion, make-up, fights and violence etc which could negate the aesthetic values and impacts that cinema has as a mass media (Sharma, 2007). Here, a Manipuri film which is certified by Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC) as ‘Digital’ was produced after years of digital video feature films being flooded in the state and accordingly Meghachandra Kongbram (2021a) stated that “Haobam Paban Kumar’s debut feature film – *Loktak Lairembee* (The Lady of the Lake), the first digital film in Manipuri cinema hit the headlines for its world premiere in the Busan International Film Festival 2016, South Korea”.

Conclusion:

Manipuri cinema has a distinctive world of its own shaped by the specific socio-cultural and economic milieu of the state. According to Aribam Syam Sharma, Manipuri cinema is born out of the love that people of this land have for art and culture. In its sense of aesthetics, Manipuri cinema own ‘Manipuriness’ which is very distinctive and derives from the cultural roots of Manipur (Sharma, 2021). As an institution, it succeeds in receiving recognition not only at the national level but also able to harvest prestigious awards at International levels also. Besides, Manipuri cinema also holds an special position at the regional cinema movement in India. However, as an institution, Manipuri cinema has evolved tremendously during the course of its last

fifty years. Resulting from the pressure it received in terms of market and economic viability and also incorporating the changing technology, the institution has evolved from celluloid to digital medium through HVS. It also absorbed the changing social currents in terms of its content and contexts. Further, the medium is also incorporating and molding according to the changing socio-political landscape of the land and thus continue to amuse the public with its marvelous feature and non-feature films.

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