

IMAGERY AND REPRESENTATION OF POST-COLONIAL MANIPURI SOCIETY IN SHUMANG LILA

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Abstract: Shumang Lila of Manipur, a traditional Manipuri theatre form, serves as the perfect example of how Cultural performances can be a reflection of the wider society and also hence a subtle carrier of history. The world of theatre is also a world of possibilities. The post colonial Manipuri society is vividly presented in Shumang Lila' s journey, be it the tussle between modernity and tradition, the dynamics of religious world, the delicate relationship within the family, the upheaval in the political world, commercialization and commodification due to influence of outside world, possibility of different sexualities and the influx of advanced technologies. If it serves as the medium of entertainment it also is the space for self analysis and thought process.

There is always a dialogue between theatre and the social dynamics in various historical epochs. It may also not be wrong to state that theatrical performances and networks even go beyond the given codes and conventions which are emphasized in the lived experiences of the people of a community. So, the theatrical world is both within and beyond the whole framework of cultural, ideological, ethical and epistemological principles of the society. This is because it exists both in real and fictive worlds. If it takes elements from the society it also gives back, sometimes maintaining a braided relationship. This is also emphasized by Romila Thapar¹ when she talks about the interface between literature and history in her study of the changing representation, over historical time, of the character Sakuntala in both the narrative present in the Mahabharata, and in Kalidasa's play *Abhijnana-Sakuntala*. In this case, there are changing facets of a single narrative vis-à-vis the social contexts, which is also valid in this present essay when such mythological and historical plays as *Moirang Parba*² has been rendered in various ways. What is also important in the present article is the presence of such interface between the contemporary social context and the plays which came up time to time, irrespective of their durability through popular demand. During the years of strong colonial and feudal assertions, Manipuri theatre reacted, represented and dialogued with the prevailing political, economic and cultural realities. The present work will look into the role of Manipuri theatre in general and Shumang Lila, the traditional Manipuri theatre form (A theatre form where a troupe is constituted exclusively either of male or female. In a male troupe the female character is played by male and in a female troupe male character by female), in particular, in telling a history of a postcolonial, post-feudal/monarchical, and democratic Manipuri society while they make their own histories. This approach may be an alternative historiography. Such narrations may not necessarily be like compiling of any recorded actual events, facts, figures and happenings but a subtle and coded understanding of the time and society through art.

When we use the terms postcolonial, post-feudal, and post-monarchical, we are using them with qualifications. In the administrative sense the terms may communicate their formal meanings. However, there have been many pointers to these terms, especially the post-colonial.

¹ Thapar, Romila (1999). *Sakuntala: Texts, Readings, Histories*. New Delhi: Kali for Women.

² Stories based on the legends of Moirang, a town in Bishnupur District.

These questions are valid given the understanding of the term by some of the scholars from Northeast India in particular and from the marginal flanks of Indian social and political system. It is an emerging understanding that there is still a considerable remnant of coloniality or new form of coloniality, which is executed in the peripheries of India, both geographical and social. The formally decolonized regimes may also turn out to be a subtle ‘colonizing’ agent towards a people in the margins. This is a case of counter-narrative becoming a grand narrative, which is a target for many dissenting narratives from within. This is also where the narratives of Northeast India in general and Manipur in particular are counter to the grand narrative of India. Same can be said of post-monarchical and post-feudal, at least in case of Manipur where monarchy has been formally substituted by the democratic political system. Nevertheless the place of king, although symbolic and tutelary in nature, is still recognized in the religious, ritualistic, cultural and social domains.

In case of Manipur, the legacy of imperialism, in social and cultural fields, was both British and Hindu. The Hindu cultural influence was consolidated during the imperialist era. However, the historical shift of the political set up of Manipur after independence and her merger with India coincided with the change in the genres within Shumang Lila also. This era was a new era when the Manipuris experienced a ‘new world’ after World War II. Manipur was then exposed to different people, different struggles and new economic opportunities in terms of war contracts etc. In terms of theatrical development in Shumang Lila, this phase saw the introduction of scriptwriting in 1950. Before this, the Shumang Lila plays were not written in a well-established structure but the leader of the troupe would dictate the dialogues and the members learned them by heart. Moreover there were mainly comic plays, which did not have constant plot and story lines but were just made up and improvised, even on the spot, to entertain the audience. Though the previous era laid the foundation for social satire, the present era consolidated it in different ways. In addition to this, the early years of this era also saw many historical and mythological plays. This era ushered in plays, which did not depend on the comic heroes, typical of the previous era. Comic characters were not exaggerated but put at par with any other characters in the play. There started plays even without these comic figures. But this era did not completely snap the continuity with the previous era and there came up plays, time to time, which had comic interludes.

In the present work Shumang Lila plays in the post-colonial period will be documented by loosely placing them into three phases, based on the dominant themes. This does not discount the fact that the subsequent phases still maintain continuity with the preceding ones. The first phase is between the 1950s and the 1960s. During this time, documentary type plays predominated. They were historical and mythological plays which were comedies and tragi-comedies, where the morality, religious and social themes were dominant. The second phase may be between 1970s and 1990s. This phase saw the changes in the field of performance itself with the introduction of play-back singing and raised stage. This phase marked the upsurge of more political plays due to the existential anxieties in Manipur’s political atmosphere, though there were still plays with the all time relevant theme of morality and family values. This phase also is registered for its increasing commercialization of the cultural products. The third phase is from the late 1990s up to the present day when there is representation of themes adhering to the changing modes of political reactions by the people; sexuality; inter-cultural dialogue; and commerce.

1. **First Phase: A Reluctant Modernity**

The literate tradition in Shumang Lila started with *Puya/Puran Meithaba* (burning of the Puya³) of N. Angouton (1950), followed by the play *B.A. Mapa Lamboiba* (renunciation of the world by the father of a B.A.), written and directed by Nongmaijing Sharma. This opened up a new horizon for the creative writers to experiment and advance the dramatic literature. This time was also a political turning point in the history of Manipur when she was merged into India under the controversial ‘Merger Agreement’ of 21 September 1949. This new era also coincided with the new entrance into ‘modernity’, with various qualifications in Manipur, vis-a-vis tradition. The Manipuri society was trying to adjust with the various characteristics of modernity like rationality which encompasses individualism, critiquing of religious and traditional authority, separation of the private from the public domain and most of all liberal, secular, and democratic ideals. But the Manipuri society was fervently attached to the tradition with all its characteristics like social practices which seek to celebrate and inculcate certain behavioural norms and values, implying continuity with a real or imagined past, and usually associated with widely accepted rituals or other forms of symbolic behavior.

The advent of written script in Shumang Lila also enabled archiving of the contents of the plays which was not easy in the era of oral tradition. In the culture of historical recording, written forms are granted a more reliable source than archeological and oral renditions. The reason being ‘the superior ability of writing to survive in its physical manifestation and to be passed on from epoch to epoch, either as *non-narrative* artifacts such as account books, bureaucratic registers of such events as births, ... or as narrative artifacts such as contemporary histories...and even avowedly semi-fictional accounts such as myths or ballads.’⁴ On the other hand ‘oral discourse relies on the faithfulness of its transmitters and receivers, neither of which can be perfect as a means of recording events’. However, written records also suffer from selection and omission of representation, which means there cannot be a complete and reliable picture of events when there is involvement of the ideological frame of the persons who do this job.

The consciousness of one’s identity and the need to assert it vocally can be an effect of the modernist project. In Shumang Lila this is reflected when the Manipuri society was involved in the existential crisis, a crisis aroused by the threat to its survival and its endeavour to make its presence felt to an ‘other’. Theatre, in general and Shumang Lila, in particular, serve as a space where there can be comparatively open critical engagement about the happenings in the wider society which is not possible in a real social setting due to censoring by various forces.

1.1 Era of Religious and Historical as Cultural

The modernist ideals were reflected in Manipur of 1950s when there was consolidation of the braiding between the religious and the cultural, which cannot be separated in the Meitei society. Again, history has been accommodated in the contemporary culture. This was felt in both the form and content of Shumang Lila genres. The religious was co-opted by the cultural practitioners in order to create a sense of community and then a nationalist feeling among the Manipuris. This was orchestrated in both the structure and contents of plays of that time.

Structurally, Shumang Lila also follows the *Natyasastra* tradition of *Sabha Vandana* and *Prastavna* (bowing to the audience and king during monarchy) and they were known as *Kouwaz*

³ *Puyas* are the indigenous books of knowledge.

⁴ Cobley, Paul (2001). *Narrative*. London: Routledge. p. 32.

and *Beitha* which were mainly prologues of the plays. In terms of the content of these forms, initially they were sung in Bengali and were religious in theme i.e. invoking of Radha and Krishna to establish a *Sankirtan* in the performance space. But in 1957-58, the religious text was done away with and secular one was introduced and rendered in Manipuri with matching tune by Mutum Bori. It introduced patriotic elements in Shumang Lila which evoked the sense of historicity among the audience. With the decrease of the authoritative control of the monarchy there was considerable growth in the religious revivalist tendency and movement against *Vaisnavism*, which the protagonists of the new movement considered as ‘outsider’ and ‘other’. During this era the religious sphere became the main site of anxiety and contest. The religious revivalism was started by Naoriya Phulo, a Manipuri (Meitei) in 1930, who waged an anti-Brahmin and anti-Hindu movement in Cachar District of Assam. In Manipur valley, following him, a movement called *Sanamahism* (named after a Meitei house deity) was started in 1945. It targeted mainly the Bengali hegemony in cultural sphere rather than fellow Meiteis. There is a presumption among some groups adhering to this indigenous belief system that *Vaisnavism* had eroded people from being rooted to their ‘real’ being and hence being with the ‘other’. Despite this, *Vaisnavite* system remained the dominant system encompassing both religious and cultural spheres of the people.

Apart from this emerging crisis in religious and cultural domains, the historical shift of the political set up of Manipur after independence and her merger with India, brought in a systematization of the theatrical structure of Shumang Lila, which would be congenial to both the producers and the consumers. So, ideology and economy was brought together to create a form of negotiation between the producers and consumers. Introduction of scriptwriting was also part of this negotiation. This introduced genres of plays, ranging from religious to mythological, historical and, above all, social, which captured the tastes of the audiences. Incidentally the first play with written script, *Puya Meithaba* had religious theme which tried to retell the ‘coercive’ forces employed by the Hindu missionaries to convert the Manipuris into *Vaisnavism* during the reign of king Pamheiba or Garibniwaz (1709-1751) under the instigation of Shantidas Goshai, a missionary of the *Vaisnavite* sect, *Ramandi*. This play was the first manifest attempt in Shumang Lila to go back to the past and assert the Manipuri identity. This case may not be interpreted entirely as a modern phenomenon, mainly the European concept, but a reiteration of the inherent tussle between ‘self’ and ‘other’, which is older than the ‘modernity’ itself. This play tried to instill realism in the fictionalized characters. Again it was loaded with essentialist motives, sometimes deflecting from the ‘authentic’ historical events, to instigate anger in the audience of how the Manipuris were forced to convert to Hinduism. This created a kind of dilemma in the minds of the audience. The audience was mostly constituted by *Vaisnava* Meiteis and yet they stood against the way they were converted.

Here there is a slight blurring of boundary between fiction and non-fiction. Here history becomes narrative where there is possibility of selection, omission and construction of events. This possibility was used well by the artistes of the play. The verbal intellectual repartee between Lourebam Khongnangthaba and Shantidas Goshai, the two protagonists of the play, to establish the superiority of their respective religions, interspersed with sarcasm, mainly from the side of the latter, aroused an emotional fluidity among the audience, who were mainly *Vaisnavites*, yet moved by the event. The emotion was let loose when Angouton who took the role of Shantidas Goshai was pelted by some in the audience.

Angouton was specialized in this genre of historical and mythological plays. He later wrote plays like *Imoinu Chahongbi* (on the house female deity of the same name),

Charairongba, *Saiyon taret*, *Heikru Hidongba* etc. Later the two plays, *Puya Meithaba* and *Imoinu Chahongbi* were met with objections from the side of the authority. The Bar Association of Manipur registered its disappointment saying that it was unlike a civilized society to look down upon the civilization and culture of another people (read as Bengali), which these plays supposedly did. Following this opinion Ahanthem Nilamani gave new names *Kangla Phambalda Thambal* (Thambal (the queen whom Garibniwaz forcibly married) in palace) for *Puya Meithaba* and *Washak Ngakpa* (keeping of the promise) for *Imoinu Chahongbi*. Even today the recorded audio version of *Puya Meithaba* is able to stir the sentiments of the Manipuris and germinate the sense of historicity in their minds.

Among the popular mythological and historical plays, which otherwise were performed with written scripts, were *Shandrembi Cheisra*, *Laiyingthou Khoriphaba*, *Pidonnu*, *Kabui Keioiba*, *Ngangbiton*, *Shanthalembi*, *Pamheiba* (about the king Garibniwaz), *Bhagyachandra* (about the king who reigned from 1759 to 1762 and 1763 to 1798), *Phadok Pemcha* etc. These plays were not performed just for the sake of performing but had social messages which were relevant to the contemporary time. For instance, *Charairongba*⁵ (1952) of Angouton was about the integrity of the king Charairongba (1698-1709), the father of Garibniwaz, shown equally towards all his subjects both in the hills and valley. This was evident from the fact that he married Chaibi, a hill girl. He was the first king who converted to *Vaisnavism* and followed Sri Krishna and Radha. The play was built on the theme of power struggle and idealism. The story goes this way. When he became strong enough to understand and face the world, Khwai Kekru, a *maichou* (scholar) narrated the story of how his father Paikhomba was killed by the hill people and his head taken away to their village as war trophy. The *maichou* infused Charairongba with strength to retrieve his father's head to avenge the shame. Accordingly he invaded the village, fought a bloody battle and returned along with his father's head. After this accomplishment he performed *Ukrong-hongba* (burying of skull) ceremony for his father's head offering the skull to the Lainingthou Sanamahi, a house deity. This has a happy ending with the accomplishment of the hero's adventure.

This play also depicted the relationship between 'self' and 'other' i.e. between the valley and hill people. This was relevant in this era when the practice of purity and pollution between the hill and valley people was still intact and the theme was chosen especially for the audience to learn a lesson from the past. This is important for Shumang Lila as it, like other performing art forms, involves both efficacy and entertainment, which are braided to each other to form a whole. It establishes a link to an absent 'other'; abolishes time and space and creates a symbolic time and space; brings the 'other' 'here' and also it means for those who are 'here' and emphasizes 'now'.

1.2 Representations of the Dynamics within the Family

Other than plays with religious, historical and mythological themes, this era of 1950s and 60s also saw plays which addressed the macro and micro facets of social and familial relationships in the Manipuri society. One of the first plays was *B.A. Mapa Lamboiba* (adoption of monk-hood by the father of a B.A) of 1950. It was a social play, which reflected the change and frailty in the social relationship with the coming of modernization and higher education in the post-war and post-colonial era. The dissipation of *thakshi khasi* (discipline) between the elder and younger

⁵ Gathered from Angouton.

people in the family and social life was the main theme of this play. Here a son who is a B.A. passed thinks himself to be the master of his own destiny and goes his own ways disrespecting the wisdom of his father. There is a generation gap between the two. The tussle between the modernity and tradition is also witnessed in this play, when the son asserts his own individuality, which might sound dislocated in a time when there is rampant affirmations of the communitarian norms. But the sign of the gradual development of individuality is shown when the father instead of disciplining his son retires to his own fate and becomes *lamboiba* (monk) distancing himself from the pressures of the ‘ modern’ world.

G.C. Tongbra (Tongbram Gitchandra) was one outstanding playwright who gave the right response to the changing Manipuri world with his satirical social plays in the 1950s and 60s. Some of his popular plays were *Matric Pass*, *Mani Mamou* (Mother-in-law and daughter-in-law) (1958), *Nongpok Leima*, *Ningon Mawa Pass* (Pass in the test for being a son-in-law), *Meitei Chanu* (Meitei woman) (1965), *Memthoibi*, etc. Some other plays tried to look into the unconscious realms of the traditional society like exposing the foibles in the family relationship due to the uncertainty aroused by the meeting of modernity and tradition or two traditions i.e. its exposure to the social realities of Indian society. One very forceful play depicting the constant turmoil in a polygamous family was *50,000* (1961) and another, which addressed the influx of the decadent culture of dowry, was *A-oonpot* (early 1960s). Another play of this year, which addressed the sensitive issue of religion, was *Mahaprabhu Phita Onba* (Measurement of Mahaprabhu with *phita*, the measuring tape). This play was to critique the obscurantist elements of *Vaisnavism* felt mainly by the neo-revivalist elements in the society. These plays were followed by the three series of *Ningol* (the maiden) of Heingang Party under M. Binod.

One of the most popular plays of the 1960s which is remembered and whose dialogues are mimicked till today was *Ipagi Ibungo* (my son) (1969) of North Imphal Jatra Mandal or Heingang Party, scripted by Ngarangbam Ibohal. After this play M. Binod began to be known as *Jagat Singh Daku* (dacoit Jagat Singh) named after the protagonist. This is also a family drama to the core, which consolidates the aphorism ‘ my blood is thicker than yours’ . In such plays, there is in-depth analysis of relationships within the family. The representations also emphasized the changing values, probably, due to the exposure to new cultural and economic strands from other societies and also new media of entertainment and communication. There are also cases of generation gap between the new and older generations in terms of perceptions of values, eating habits, dressing sense etc. in particular and life style in general. There is ‘ superficial’ adoption of modernity in many cases, though the adoption of the universal values of modernity by some may not be negated in toto. On the other hand, there is experimentation with the traditional system. This can be seen when there is modification in the form and retention of the content. All this is reflected in the family relationship in the Manipuri society. The changes in the modes of relationship amongst the members of a family, especially, between daughter-in-law and mother-in-law, are clearly reflected in most of the plays, which we have discussed in this section. Running a family or household is considered being an art in the Manipuri society. There is a saying in Manipuri, ‘ *Yum panba haibasi sektagi leingoidagisu henna kuppi*’ (Running a family is finer than the sand of the Sekta River).

2. Second Phase: Musically Political and Commercial

This phase marks many changes both in generic and thematic terrains of Shumang Lila. Politically also the 1970s was a tumultuous era with the rise of insurgency to demand ‘ sovereignty’ of Manipur from the Indian Union despite Manipur gaining the statehood in

1972. This was also an era of the beginning of militarization of civil spaces in the state. This was felt by Shumang Lila too. It started involving itself into didactic enterprises which drove the audiences not only ‘ to feel’ but also ‘ to think’ over the state of affairs. Ironically, Shumang Lila adopted *Bollywood* style of production which triggered commercialization and also professionalism of Shumang Lila.

This era saw an increasing growth of assimilation of capitalist elements in different facets of society in general and cultural production and consumption in particular. This means there was also commodification of cultural practices and performances. However, capitalist motives cannot be solely interpreted as a negative development, as generally done in the academic circle. The contemporary subjectivity, which drives the cultural politics, is visible in Shumang Lila domains also. The 1970s also saw the entry of *Nupi Shumang Lila* troupes (female troupes) into the Shumang Lila culture though female artistes had been part of the proscenium theatre since 1940s. It was a movement to revive the forgotten tradition of *Moirang Parba* in Shumang Lila, which had been overtaken by social plays since 1950s. The movement was feminist, not in the sense that it was anti-male but to plug a vacuum and to materialize the sense of responsibility and creativity of the female artistes. It started a politically purist approach to rectify the ‘ adulteration’ seen in the old *Moirang parba* performances of the monarchical era.

The need to organize Shumang Lila in an orderly manner was also felt and in 1971 the All Manipur Jatra Association was established.⁶ This was also an era when the authority representing the government was also in intervention mode. The struggle for hegemony, which is a process, continues during this era also. When the initial celebration of *Sanskritic* tradition started waning, a new form of power group sprang up to take the place. As mentioned elsewhere, it did not mean the complete collapse of the previous elements. The reflective politics, which had been going on in Shumang Lila, was given a formal face with the intervention of Manipur State Kala Akademi, a cultural body affiliated to the government of Manipur which was established in 1972. Initially it organized annual festivals under the name of ‘ *Jatra* Festivals’ . The politically conscious self was unearthed with the introspection on the very name ‘ *Jatra*’ , which the Akademi felt was inappropriate for an indigenous performing art form. So, in 1973 it officially changed the name from *Jatra* to ‘ Shumang Lila’ .⁷ However, still the term *Jatra* was prevalent in the names of the troupes like *Meitei Leima Jatra cum Drama Association* and *North Imphal Manipur Jatra Mandal*.

The next big change of this phase was coming up of a new genre called *Eshei Lila* with the introduction of play-back singing. They used musical instruments such as *tabla*, *dholak*, harmonium, guitar, flute, violin, keyboard and various others, to give background music for scenes enacted and hence augmenting the beauty of performance. The song and dance sequences were intricately rendered by those neo *Nupi Shabis* (male actresses of male Shumang Lila troupe). This again introduced a tradition of male singers singing in female voices. It was degeneration for many and refreshing changes for others. However, good music and dance sequences are not ticket to a successful production without other equally good elements, such as dialogues, theme, acting etc. The change came as a response to the booming media of entertainment such as Cinema and Television. Some of the *Eshei Lilas* of that time were *Krishna Bal Lila* (1975), *Thadoi* (1976) and *Ashira Mioibagi Punshi* (Is this a life?) (1977).

⁶ Singh, Ayekpam Shyamsunder (1980). *Manipurgi Shumang Lila amasung Theatre* (Manipuri Shumang Lila and Theatre). Imphal: Manipur Sahitya Parishad. pp. 2 & 3.

⁷ Gathered from M. Binod.

With this change, two broad categories of Shumang Lila emerged viz. 1) *Dialogue Lila* (play without background music) and 2) *Eshei Lila*. But they were renamed and recognized by Manipur State Kala Akademi as 1) *Ariba Shumang Lila* (old type of Shumang Lila) and 2) *Anouba Shumang Lila* (new Shumang Lila). This ushered in the culture of ‘filmisation’ of Shumang Lila too with its emphasis given on the colourful costumes, make-up, etc. which in a way invited showism. This does not mean that these new genre lacked in the subtlety of plots and techniques. Its rapid growth became a major reason for the downfall and demise of Ariba Shumang Lila. Today, Manipur has only Eshei Lila genre, in case of male troupes, but the female troupes still stick to non-playback singing form. The audience also supports the colourful world of Eshei Lila since their tastes are also driven by the new world of cinema. Coincidentally the first Manipuri feature film (black and white) *Matangi Manipur* (Manipur of the time), produced by K.T. Films, was released in 1972. The first colour feature film *Langlen Thadoi* came in 1985. However, they were all *Bollywood* style of production, structurally.

Such influence of Hindi movies percolated well to the Dialogue Lila too. In 1972-73 *Mirot* came which was an adaptation of the Hindi film *Lal Rekha*. Another play in this mould was *Punshi Khongloi* (Life Partner) of Heingang Party, which was an adaptation of the Hindi Film *Arju. Yong Natte Mee-ni* (Not a monkey but a man), was influenced by *Chhota Bhai*. The main forte of this play was the female antagonist which tried to outdo the character essayed in the Hindi version by Lalita Pawar, the quintessential wicked female character of Hindi Films. In this period *Abir Khan*, one of the most popular plays ever, was performed by Meitei Leima Jatra cum Drama Association. This was based on the relationship among the inhabitants of Manipur – the Meiteis, Hill people and Meitei Pangal (Muslims). Shumang Lila’s love of the foreign theme was again seen in the form of *Huranba*,⁸ again of Heingang Party, which was from an original Bengali play. Then came *Devdas* (1974-75), performed by the City Jatra Mandal, under the guidance of the Gurus of Roopmahal, a renowned proscenium theatre group, who infused the ingredients of good and enjoyable play. The role of Devdas was essayed by Inakhunba of Heingang village, who, since then, came to be known by his character’s name.

After this trend of adaptation there came some plays with strong political themes. The play *Halakhidraba* (the one who never came back) of 1975-76 brought to light the excesses committed by the State Armed Forces. It was a play based on the raping of a girl called Charui Rose of Ukhrul, by BSF personnel in 1974, who later committed suicide. The state power was manifested when it banned this play. Again in 1978-79 *Eegi Nong* (Rain of blood) of Chana Lukhoi came which depicted the state violence against the civilians. For this the writer was incarcerated. The political unrest was not always between the ‘self’ and ‘other’ but also within the ‘self’ itself when splinter groups within the Manipuri society scrambled for their spaces with contradictory dynamics. This was aptly depicted by the ‘folk’ play *Chaina pung*⁹ (the battle ground), which was the tussle between two rival Meitei clans, *Luwang* and *Khuman*. Again another play with revolutionary theme was *Sharangi nongsha* (Lion in cage).¹⁰

Shumang Lila cannot be monolithic in its form and content. It is a wholesome theatre where entertainment and efficacy are braided in a healthy manner. The period of the 1980s also saw numerous plays on family relationship such as *Imou Ibema* (My daughter-in-law) (1981), *Keinadan* (Gifting of the bride) (1981), *Nangdaniko Imounupi* (the only daughter-in-law) (1986),

⁸ This play was much in demand in the Andro, a Chakpa village in the eastern side of Imphal. The villagers invited the troupe almost on the eve of every marriage ceremony in the village.

⁹ Performed by Heingang Party.

¹⁰ Of the same troupe.

Leishabigi Machado (that son of the maiden), *Lady Killer* (1989) etc. The 1990s saw some of the powerful political plays against the people who misappropriated the power. *Ee-gi Mahao* (1991) represented the inability of the powerless to voice out their grievances for justice. A futuristic play *23rd Century* (1992) was the depiction of the chinks within the Manipuri society and the advantage taken by outsiders seeing this divided house. It showed Manipur under the rule of a Punjabi Chief Minister in the futuristic 23rd Century. It was a grim prognosis which rattled the sentiments of the people of Manipur. This era was also teeming with plays with essentialist motives harping on the history. *Lanpungi Pungkhoh* (the sound of the war drum) (1994-95), performed by Naharol Khongthang Artistes Association, addressed the genesis of insurgency in Manipur with threadbare analysis of the ‘ Merger Agreement’ . *Keisamthong Thoibi* (1997) was a forceful play which addressed the question of purity and pollution between the hill and valley people. It contained the age old time pass of Brahmin bashing but with subtlety. ‘ Folk’ plays with contemporary relevance did not cease to come up too. *Numit Kaappa* (Shooting down the Sun) (1997) was a mythological play. *Angangba Phiral* (Red flag) scripted by Chana Lukhoi had leftist theme, which was based on the killing of workers in Chicago by American Government. This play was out and out political, which tried to connect with the struggling people of Manipur. It was performed consecutively for two years on the May Day at Irabot Park, Lamlai (east of Imphal).

3. Third Phase: Local and Global

The 21st century marks the considerable broadening of the horizon of the themes of Shumang Lila plays. Plays with international themes are making their efforts to educate and entertain the Manipuri audiences. *Meigi ching* (2000), *Memsahab-ki saree (memsahab’ s saree)* (2001), *Eetinphamda Sambal* (fence in the rendezvous) (2002), *World Trade Centre* (2002), *Devadas* (2003), *21st Century-gi Kunti* (Kunti of the 21st Century) (2003), *Lidice gi gulap* (2004), *Gusmaogi Khudol– East Timor* (2005-06) etc. are some of the plays with high social, political and aesthetic values. The ‘ glocalization’ process is clearly visible in these plays. Other popular plays of this era are *Pizza* (2013), *Luchingba* (2013), *Maibado Maibido Mapuroibado*, *Sanagi Nga*, *Yukhal marumda*, *Fake encounter* (2016) etc.

Shumang Lila did soul searching when it started critiquing the in-fighting amongst insurgent groups. What this phase also registers is the triangular power relationship among state forces, insurgents, and the suffering public that are sandwiched in the crossfire between the first two parties. Again the drastically changing inter-community relationship between the Meiteis, ‘ Nagas’ and Kukis following the latter two’ s desire to have their own sphere of political existence including territorial separation, has also been a favorite theme of this phase.

Apart from such themes there is increasing emphasis given on the issues connected to sexuality, HIV/AIDS, environment, mobile phone technology, Information technology etc. Apart from the themes of the plays the troupes have to adapt to the demands of technologically advanced time. For this they have to experiment with other media like telecasting their productions in local Television channels like ISTV and Impact TV. Apart from this, plays are well marketed in CD forms and also uploaded in internet for those who do not have access to the live performances of the plays or for those locals who are not in the habit of seeing live performances. Plays themselves do not become popular even if they take the help of the advanced technology. For making them popular all the ingredients of a theatrical performance have to be taken into account with sheer professionalism. One important aspect is the selection of *Nupi Shabis* (male actresses). R.K. Sanaton, Arun, Bishesh and Heramoti are some of them who

enrich the aesthetics of plays. Understanding the nerve of the people is the ultimate selling point of Shumang Lila and troupes are determined to present the best possible.

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